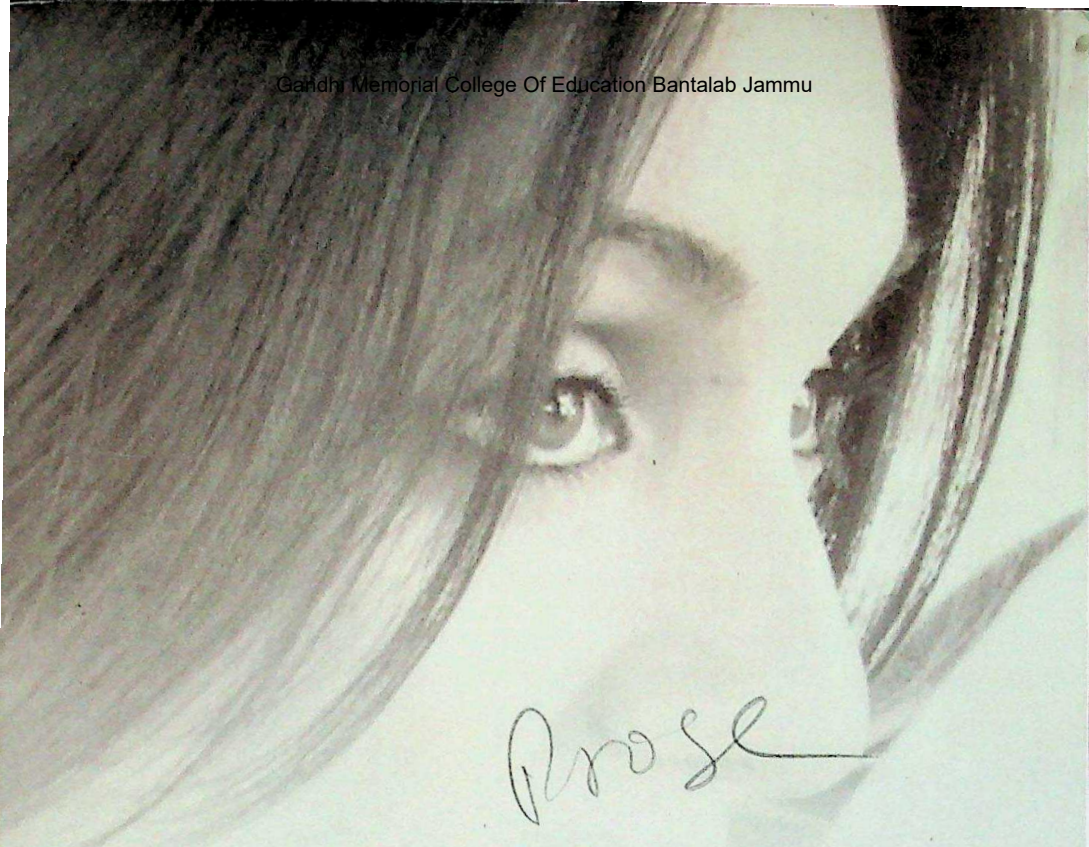
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Body Betrayed Beauty

A Young Mother's Courageous Journey with Cancer

Neha Ganju Tanna

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अग्निशेखर और क्षमा कौल
द्वारा यह
पुस्तक सप्रेम भेंट

G.M. College of Education
Raipur, Bantalab
Jammu.
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This book is dedicated to my three-year-old daughter
Aariyana
who was the source of my strength and courage during
my journey with cancer.

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I am grateful to the true author of this work, my daughter, Neha Ganju Tanna, for leaving behind such a great treasure to publish.

You are the best that I have ever achieved in my life! You gave me motherhood. You gave me something to work for, and I feel good about having been able to collect all your writings and compiling them into a book.

Time and body betrayed you, and you left without completing your writings and telling us how you

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wanted your writings published. I hope that I found all your writings and that you will forgive me for missing any of them.

Beauty within you to face challenges of life with strength and courage, has taught me how to live rest of my life.

Chandramukhi Ganju

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Preface

This book is not about my battle with cancer or my side effects or my complaints about it. It is about how I managed to enjoy my life despite knowing my end. So, if you want to read this book, do not go skipping ahead to find out how it ends. Just as you do not begin life by knowing how you are going to die, you do not start a book by knowing how it is going to end. You start your journey with a goal in mind. It begins with taking your first breath, your first step, continues with having your first dream and then with your moving forward, fulfilling the dream or goal or altering its direction—but you always move forward.

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Introduction

"It is what it is"

As Neha's uncle and physician, I had an unenviable dual-hatted role, which resulted in a most unique bond. Although Neha was very young in age, her courage and acceptance, in handling her terminal illness, revealed the wisdom that forever changed my very perception of life and challenges it throws at you.

During her darkest days, plagued by the volatile medical complications of her disease, we would chat about numerous topics concerning life and sometimes death. On a few occasions, when she had life-threatening complications, she asked me if it might be "the time." Even though it was difficult, I tried my best to be honest with her, and she trusted that I always would be. Several times, I was able to tell her that there were options available, and when we could take an action to save her; we did— defying death time after time.

Around a week or so before she passed away, she experienced about of palpitations with very fast heartbeat, over 180 (60 to 100 being normal) and severe breathlessness, caused by fast heartbeat.

We quickly took her over to a nearby hospital where I practice and had the nurse give her an injection which promptly restored her normal heartbeat. She felt

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better, almost normal. Since that day she kept repeating that I saved her life.

Sadly, I knew that was far from true. What we treated was, even though potentially life-threatening, a transient and easily correctable complication, while the real monster—her cancer, was lurking nearby, ready to snatch her life mercilessly.

About three days before she passed away, she started feeling increasingly short of breath and uncomfortable. This was because cancer had encased her lungs, invaded her abdominal organs, filling up the belly with very little room to breathe. I was sitting by her side in the hospital. She requested I give her medication to enable her to breathe more easily; she had trouble speaking due to her breathlessness.

At this time, she asked me one final time --"Could this be it?"

I knew we had run out of options and I could not lie to her, so I replied,

"I'm afraid that it might be."

She looked down silently for several seconds, then looked straight at me, and with a serene and straight face said,

"It is what it is."

She said it with a sense of finality and acceptance, as if to convey that it is pointless to debate and discuss, search for answers to the riddle of life and death. Death... just like life happens, she gently closed her eyes, and these were the last words she spoke to me.

It has been over a year since she spoke those words to me, but time and again, they guide me. In those few

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words, she showed me courage, grace, wisdom, and most difficult of all, acceptance. I think of her immense courage when faced with death, and am inspired to handle any number of circumstances. During those trying months, she looked to me as a mentor, confidante and source of strength, but she would never know, that the way she endured her life's greatest challenge, became my life's greatest lesson.

Her time was unjustly cut short, and the pain we feel is indelible, but she was a warrior in every sense. At her young age she displayed an evolution of her mind and strength of character that so many cannot reach over lifetimes.

For that alone, she was an evolved soul, and for that alone, she IS eternal.

Dr. Chander Shaykher

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Prologue

Persephone

The earliest memory, I have of Neha is from the weeks before her wedding. You were crouched beneath the dining table of your uncle's home with all the children of our community, engaging each and every one of them in whatever inane topics they wanted to discuss with you. I remember joining you under the table in awe at how easily you would talk with them, the children, and then me, the teenager, and finally the uncles and aunties who would parade through the halls of the home showering you with blessings (under the dining table of course) for your upcoming nuptials. You greeted everyone with a kind smile and a warm embrace. You had time and patience for the tiniest babies and for the oldest grandparents. Your laughter was infectious. I don't think I've ever met anyone more personable or genuine, not to mention beautiful. No wonder you were so loved.

I still remember your piercing blue-green eyes sitting six years later in my home, with your husband and parents in tow, your baby at home with your aunt, as you discussed your diagnosis with my parents. I excused myself from the table. I left my home, not able to, no, not wanting to comprehend what I was hearing. I spent that afternoon shadowing at Ryder Trauma

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Center, distracting myself from the gravity of what was unfolding in your life. Everything seemed so real in that moment: the OR, the anesthesia, the ports and cameras, that the conversation your husband had with my father about your prognosis seemed too far-fetched, comical even.

It was only when I got home that I learned about the details. And so began a story you weren't writing. The following year and a half was filled with treatment, both conventional and alternative. You went to the best medical centres in the nation and tested the latest medications. All the while you continued working and raising your daughter. You continued to attend community picnics and social gatherings, when you had the strength, at least. And whenever you were seen in public, you looked as beautiful as you did during your engagement—smiling, laughing, playing with the kids, while at the same time having kahwa with the adults.

Unfortunately, your disease was a coward. It envied the time you spent with family and friends and not with it, so it came back with a vengeance, trying to absorb every waking moment you had. It was possessive, like a deranged lover. It didn't want to share you. It wanted to consume you. But you resisted. You showed bravery in the face of the devil. Like Persephone herself, you granted Hades his time, but your mind was forever in the meadows and sunshine of the world above. Although you had to endure prolonged hospitalisations, you remained connected to your work—taking phone calls, chairing meetings, and writing reports from your hospital bed. You still hung out with friends, although they had to come visit you because you were physically too weak to leave the hospital. You coloured, wrote

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poetry, and told stories to whoever was around to listen—and believe me, there was always someone.

My mother received a phone call that you were not doing well. She told me to visit you when I had a chance, and so I did, tearing myself away from my clinical rotations. You were still in that same bed, but this time your colouring books and laptop were set aside, and you were struggling with an oxygen mask, the edema in your lungs making it difficult for you to breathe. You looked tired, your eyes playing peekaboo from behind your lids, an effect of the strong opioids you were taking for pain. You weren't able to speak much because you would immediately desaturate. I was uncomfortable. This was not the image I had of my vibrant and loquacious didi. You were a patient, and by far the sickest one I had seen. I didn't know what to do, look at your vital signs or hug your mother who was quietly weeping in a corner of the room. So I just stood there awkwardly and spoke to your college friend, who periodically gave you sips of water through your non-rebreather. When the pulmonary nurse came in to perform an ABG, I excused myself saying, "I'll come back and check up on you later!" You weakly nodded and raised your hand to wave.

Four days later you left us. Only your parents, brother, husband, and in-laws were allowed in your room. The rest of us stood solemnly in the halls of the ICU, watching with bated breath the heart monitor in the nurses' station. I had never seen a blood pressure that low—I actually confused it for your respiratory rate. My father, rushing from his own rounds, came to join your family in quiet vigil. In fact, it was he who broke the news to the rest of us, coming out of your room with

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tears in his eyes, saying the words: "heart rate zero."

And so began the catharsis. The months of anger, confusion, rage, and sadness poured out from everyone. The women howled, the men cried softly. But everyone wept. Everyone had hoped for a different outcome. Everyone who was at your uncle's house celebrating your wedding with pomp and joy cursed the same God they prayed to for blessings. I was inconsolable.

You were my didi. You were someone I admired and loved, perfect in every way. Hard-working, beautiful, kind, intelligent, and funny. When your door was finally opened for everyone to come in and pay our respects, I clearly remember thinking it was a mistake. I saw your chest rise! You were breathing! It wouldn't have been the first time doctors were wrong. I turned to my father excitedly, because I thought I had cracked the code, but just as quickly as my hopes were raised, I realized that I was fooled. It wasn't your chest that was rising; it was your mattress. Hospitals have great technology these days—great enough to make the dead seem living, but not great enough to actually keep them alive.

The final memory I have of you is of your face on your pillow, eyes shut, your blue-greens forever hidden from the world, your hair disheveled, your mouth slightly agape. But you were still beautiful, preserved in silent perfection like a true doll. I kissed your forehead and ran my hand over your hair. I felt betrayed by the same medicine I so respected. I felt cheated by the same God I prayed to every night. I was haunted by my final words to you, feeling like I had lied to a dying woman.

A few hours later we all walked out of the hospital.

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It was still early afternoon. The sky was an overwhelming blue. The air was crisp and painfully refreshing. We had escaped from the underworld, but our Persephone was left behind. Hades had finally claimed her for posterity. I wish there was a silver lining, but like Demeter we are still waiting.

- Dr Shirin Razdhan

[Dr. Shirin Razdan has known Neha Ganju Tanna since she was a young girl. These reflections are both recollections of their time spent together and a tribute to their special relationship]

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PART I

MY BATTLE

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Quest

Why is it that what one seeks does not happen? That if one gets what one seeks, one does not enjoy it as one had imagined??

Why is it that even after we have it all, we do not have anything?

There was a time when I asked these questions. Then I grew up, stopped asking, and just accepted. Now I think, "Why did I stop wondering? Why did I stop asking?" Did I get the answers? No. Did I understand anything? No. Then why? How was I raised—just to accept things, the unanswerable? Or to go on a journey to find such answers?

The *quest*: That is how I was raised.

We each have our purpose, our journey, our quest. Find that and follow it. And never stop asking the basic questions. The answers are found within the journey, the Quest. If we do not explore, we will not find the answers to these tough questions.

Whether we have faith in God is irrelevant. Have a little faith in our search, our quest, and we will discover the answers we seek.

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Awareness

Dreams, dreams,
Crazy dreams.
Dreams, dreams,
Where do you come from, dreams?
The higher you go, the higher you fly.
The lower you bend, the lower you dive.
Starting treatment in five days;
Life feels like a funnel:
Living large to start, but then
Living in a tunnel.

Recently I was watching my childhood videos and I saw a vocal and expressive little child who found every opportunity to celebrate and share—with my cousin and best friend, creating our own dance show company with props, stage, costumes, and performances for every occasion to being hosts and tour guides during our family road trips. We started this madness when we were just six and continued all the way into our teens.

I loved the stage. I secretly wanted to be a choreographer, but I continued in academic studies instead and became an engineer. I believed, though, that I was a pretty good choreographer and could have succeeded; at least the shows and awards won during college days support this view.

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As I go down memory lane, I realize this who I truly was and am. I am an expressive person. But today I am here to share a different story: I am 33 years-old, a mother to an 18 month-old daughter, a wife, a daughter, and a professional.

On the eve of my 33rd birthday, I went to an ER for the first time, and ten days later I was confirmed to have stage-four kidney cancer. Seven days after that, I was on the operating table for eight hours as my family and friends waited and prayed for a successful operation.

There was no time to understand or grasp what was happening when I first received my diagnosis, but I decided right away that this was something I was not going to hide—mainly because of my family. How would we explain me staying home for so long during my recovery, missed functions and get-togethers? How would we hide changes in my appearance and scheduled hospital visits? This was not a stress I wanted to inflict on myself or my family.

This is where my journey starts and I am sharing it with the world for one reason only—to create awareness. I am neither a male over the age of 65, nor a heavy smoker with a family history typical of a patient with this diagnosis. How can one prepare a young female, a non-smoking, non-alcoholic with no other medical history nor any family history of this disease, for such bad news? These questions have prompted me to share my story.

The decision to share with my family and friends was one of the best decisions I made in this journey. The love, the support, the warmth, the little gestures people

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do, especially without words, were heartfelt. I began to view everyone in a different light; all these people with their gentle efforts became my heroes, because they made me believe in the power of humanity.

I have not forgotten the faces by my bedside, the fragrances of flowers sent, the words in the cards, emails and texts, or how far people travelled in order to see me. The prayers people say stay with me. It has been a life-changing, humbling experience, one for which I am most grateful.

The fight begins with awareness. The fight begins with you. After going back to the hospital a few times after my surgery, not for chemo treatments but because of pain, owing to an undiagnosed cause, I finally realized how medicine is similar to other fields of science.

Medical science is limited, even with all the tests, machines, research, academic degrees, and years of experience possessed by medical personnel. I am not trying to belittle medicine in any way but merely noting a fact that is well-known to doctors, but not necessarily to laypersons. As patients without medical degrees, we expect the tests and scans and how we describe symptoms to the best of our knowledge to provide the doctor with facts that can be translated into simple explanations of what is causing our illnesses.

In most cases doctors can comply, because of concrete evidence, but in many cases they cannot. It has nothing to do with them personally or their knowledge or even lack of experience. (Trust me. By now I have encountered almost all specialists of all experience levels and in several different hospitals in various cities.) The lack of evidence points in one direction. Unless the

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condition does not categorically say, "Yes, it's ___.", it is not easy to pinpoint the course of recovery categorically either.

It is like solving a crime and wonder why investigators are able to solve some crimes but not others. As laypersons we expect medicine to guide us toward what is unknown to us and recommend treatments. But there are many factors still unknown to the doctors themselves.

Owing to awareness collectively as a society, we have accepted what medicine can and cannot cure, but there are many unglamorous or recordable problems that are not explained so far. So, we as patients have to learn to accept that no Google search will find the solution.

Today I have a request. For anyone in distress, anyone who is struggling, or anyone troubled, simply do something, from wherever you are, to show you are there for them. No effort is too small, and no effort goes unnoticed. Sometimes just knowing that someone is there for you takes away all your worries. So please be there for someone in your life.

People mostly need time and ears to be understood and to build trust.

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Untold Story

When you read about a person usually, it is not a story about the person's "silver spoon" life but of some challenges that the person faces and overcomes, and it finishes off with a positive and successful conclusion.

But my story is not that kind.

It starts with a simple family living a simple life, with the parents doing what they could to provide for their members, and the circumstantial struggles that shaped their lives and my early life.

We became refugees as a result of terrorism in Kashmir, India, and were unable to return to our home. We then lived in a new city with new jobs for my parents and a new school for my brother and I. We lived in a one-room apartment, eating from the same kitchenware that our food was cooked in.

While the turmoil in the state and country was growing, my parents' life was turned upside down. However, all these changes were not so stressful for us as children. Children are innocently strong and resilient.

We adapted, and the main reason was that my parents made these changes a fun and learning experience for us. They did not once make us feel the

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loss that they were so gravely experiencing in so many ways and that I only understood later, during my teenage years.

Our new school, new friends, and new surroundings were challenging, but we rose to adapt to these changes. Adapting to new environments became second nature for us. Soon we moved again— this time by choice—to the United States and settled in Miami, Florida. All the adjustments had to be made yet again, and this time there were huge changes.

My brother and I were ten and eleven, respectively. Until high school, we moved every two years to new homes and new schools. Close friendships lasted only two years, and then we were forced to start again. I do not know what it really means to have close childhood friends, but it sounds fantastic. This was something I definitely wanted to give my child.

High school is the furthest back my early friendships reach. To me this is pretty precious. While growing up, I felt these changes made me stronger, but life was rough. I realize it more as childhood stories are shared with friends in college and beyond.

Comparatively, I had already seen a lot of ups and downs, and my experiences just were not so smooth and easy as their stories. Growing up all their lives in one city and having everything easily accessible, these friends never had our struggles.

But it did not dishearten me or make me feel less worthy. I always felt that I was more socially mature, more adaptable, and more resilient overall. I already had strong traits of character built in me at a young age.

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I felt all the moving, changes, and displacement gave me the strength to take on anything in life.

I may not have had luxuries and a smooth journey, but with what I did have, I became a person who would make a smooth life for myself. I could rely on my own abilities to make my life what I dreamed it would be. I felt strong and in control.

As my professional career began, I started turning my dreams into reality. I felt I was on a path that would lead directly to my goals—until circumstances slowly took over my life and started leading the way.

Unaware at the time that this was happening, I still tried to control and redirect my life at every step and to find my happiness in this. Reaching my goals became harder but never impossible;

I told myself, "I can do it!

These are mere challenges that happen in everyone's life, and I have seen worse!" Situations changed, and it was my strength to be able to alter any goal of mine to still lead to another success story.

I had not failed yet, I felt.

But at each turn, life started gaining the strength to do what it wanted or had planned for me.

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My Diagnosis and Surgery

In early 2013, I moved to India with my husband to explore new opportunities and fulfill our dreams. After two years there, in December of 2014, I decided to move to Dallas, Texas to start a new job.

I had just turned 33, and had just moved across the globe with my 16-month-old daughter.

As beginnings always are, it was exciting and a bit nerve-wracking. I was looking forward to the new year of 2015 and this new start.

My husband Kartikeya was with me, helping me settle in before he would go back to India, and we would try to make this long-distance marriage work. Everyone around was sceptical, but we had a plan and were determined to see it through.

The arrangement was not permanent, but neither of us wanted to give up our career opportunities. I knew this was not conventional, but believed it was doable while our daughter was still young. So we moved forward with our plan. We had to achieve our goal. We found a place to call home and also found my daughter's first school. But it seemed that life had its own plan.

The day before my birthday, I suddenly felt back pain and had to go to the emergency room. There I was

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first diagnosed with kidney stones and was sent home the same day with painkillers. After a week I felt nausea, vomiting, and back pain again and had to go back to the Emergency room. This time a CT scan was done. The scan revealed a mass on my kidney and I was advised to consult a urologic oncologist.

Ten days after my first visit to the ER on my daughter's first day of her new school, and the day before my husband was scheduled to fly back to India, an MRI revealed that I had stage-four kidney cancer.

All plans were cancelled. Life stood still. I felt frozen in time as everything moved normally around me. I could see everything but no one could see me. It seemed like hours and days passed, but it was only a few seconds in reality. This was a moment where motion and motionless meet: an intersection, a crossroad, the chance to choose a path.

I stood in the middle, blindfolded, guided in an unknown direction and following an unexplored path. I was told that I needed to have a surgery as soon as possible, and seven days later I was on an operating table. I endured an eight-hour surgery. The objective was to remove as much of the cancerous growths as possible, which had engulfed my left kidney, a portion of my liver and a part of my lungs.

The blindfold came off, and I felt lucky to be alive after the surgery, but I was in extreme pain and unaware of where I was. My forward-leading road was nowhere to be found.

How do I reach my goal? How do I find my path?

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Do I need to find a new goal, new path, and a new hill? Perhaps; but first I need to prepare myself to reach a point where I can start that journey again.

How long will that take? When? Do not know. At the moment, physically, I am like a baby, being cleaned, fed and wiped. I am learning to walk and celebrating each step as a milestone of success, learning to eat again, starting with liquids and moving to bland semisolids and then to solids.

I am losing desire for all my favourite foods, sleeping upright to survive on pills that I keep track of by phone and alarm. My poor body of bones…I cannot lift more than a pound, cannot lift my daughter. Never before have I felt so lost and defeated as by my physical inability.

Where am I? Where do I go? The body, in time, heals; it never goes back to what it was but, on the face of it, it looks pretty normal.

Support fades; life continues. It may seem that everything is back to normal—walking, talking, breathing, working, smiling, laughing, texting, posting pictures. It seems as though nothing has changed— but everything has changed.

For the moment, yes, all is normal, but the very next moment only a few eyes see, and it is far from normal.

Getting back up was becoming difficult, and goals and dreams had started to fade away. It seemed a whole new set of goals was needed. Now all I wished and prayed for was to have a life for the sake of my child. I just wanted to see her breathe, dance, sing, and live freely without stress or sadness.

This was now my goal, my dream and my wish.

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A Day in Life

If you are reading this and struggling with cancer, a terminal disease, or other grave illness, then you are likely know the relentlessness of pain, discomfort and complications.

Perhaps your days sound like mine.

I was struggling with pain, so my doctor gave me some morphine. I suddenly developed allergies, causing rashes and itchiness. I was sent home because my scans were clean.

After a few days, my rashes started again and I spent the afternoon vomiting. Not once or twice, but at 7 pm, 1 am, 3 am, and 4 am. I went to the ER and can you guess? I vomited again upon arrival. The doctor decided to give me a painkiller Dilaudid, because of my bad reactions to morphine. But as luck would have it, I suffered a reaction to that as well. Even water would make me nauseous and cause me to vomit. When my pain increased, so would my nausea. I then took Benadryl for my allergic reaction and vomited again, this time resulting in a severe burning in my stomach.

Over the next few days, I had a bone scan, brain MRI, and an ultrasound of my abdominal organs. I learned I had a high white blood cell count, so the doctor

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prescribed antibiotics for a possible infection. I later found out there was a lab error causing my high count and the antibiotics were stopped. I then developed a high heart rate, so I was moved to the critical care unit.

I dreaded being in the hospital, but moving beds in the hospital was a whole other level of frustration. As I shifted from one room to the next, the nurses too started and ended their shifts. This meant that medication orders were not timely. I writhed in pain as I waited hours for nurses to receive the appropriate orders to administer my pain medication.

If you have ever experienced sharp unrelenting pain, then you know a minute of pain feels like an hour, and hours of pain feel like a lifetime. In those moments, knowing that your life is not very long sometimes induces relief, because you would rather die than experience a second more of pain.

I experienced this many times during my hospital stays, and the inefficiency of the medical system was infuriating. I would beg for nurses to relieve me of my agony, but they were prisoners of their protocol, while I was a prisoner of my pain.

So, together we were shackled to this charade and I was at the mercy of their mismanagement.

Finally the medication is given and I feel relief just from the pain. I still have not been able to eat much. I have vomited whatever little I have eaten, and so I have had no bowel movements recently, causing greater concern.

Talking, moving in bed, and basic activities like brushing my teeth or hair is exhausting. I have a cough, sometimes it is dry and sometimes with phlegm.

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As you can imagine, I am not feeling well today. I have no strength or energy. Any movement gets me out of breath, so I do not want to do anything.

If you are healthy, the next time you have a bad day, be grateful for your good health. If you are sick, know that you are not alone. Others just like you have felt the pain and torture of a failing sick body and all the agony that comes with it.

It does not make your pain less, but there is comfort in knowing that someone else can understand the depth of your anguish.

I definitely can.

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*"That dreadful morning that took away my entire existence brings your serene face in front of me again and again. I am unable to understand why you had to go so soon. I am lost, with a big question mark. All I know is that a part of me died right there with you on that hospital bed. There is not a moment when I am not talking to you and choking as I cry, but I make sure I wipe my tears before my stress buster, Aariyana, catches me crying.*

*I feel you my child everywhere. I feel you in dew drops; I feel you at dawn; I feel you in the flutter of butterflies in our backyard. I feel you in the stillness of the lake every morning, I feel you in gloomy weather, when dark clouds are ready to shower rain; I feel you in ripples of waves that merge soon after they are formed and never reach the shore; I feel you in teardrops rolling down from my eyes. I feel you in the lullaby I sing at nighttime for Aariyana. I feel you in Aariyana's giggles; I feel you in her tight hugs when she sits in my lap."*

**- Chandramukhi Ganju, mother**

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Recovery and Relapse

Life is like an uphill road. We all have to climb it to reach our goals. Some may travel faster, and some may find shortcuts. I may not have been the fastest or smartest, but I knew I would reach my goal, the peak. I was determined.

But what happens to your determination when a hurricane earthquake- flood appears all at once and crushes your progress along the path—and *your* path, just *your* path, turns inward? Those close by are affected and even try to help. But you, only *you* are stuck—in a well-like hole that appears in the middle of this hill. What do you call this hurricane-earthquake-flood-well-like hole? Some call it cancer.

This is what, I was told, had been occurring internally in my body for the past four years, growing slowly but surely and gaining strength just as I was externally moving up my hill. I had no clue until it was almost too late.

It is seven months later, and a scan shows reappearance of growth. That was expected but not so soon. My plans halt once again, and a new plan of action begins at full speed as I am swept into a clinical trial. Treatment begins, and we are unaware of whether it

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will affect my body positively or negatively. That is the risk in the game. That is the nature of the game. Belief in probability leads the way. It is a bumpy road, but I am starting to live with it, even though it irritates me.

Is this going to be my new normal?

Three months later, a worse scan than the one before appears in front of the doctors. The trial stops. It is full speed ahead into the next plan of action, and I am swept into 2016 to begin new approved treatment.

It is the anniversary of my new birth—new life, new normal. Only the people in my life are the same; everything else is completely different. I cannot believe it has been a year, but I am back to where we started, with unknown factors growing inside and doctors trying to treat the unknown. Now they are attempting to treat it with a new drug.

Who knows what the future holds and for how long? It has been a year and I am still finding my way, both for a treatment that cures and a new lifestyle.

I still ask myself, "Where am I? Where do I go? What is my path?"

I am in a sinkhole trying to find a way out and get back on my upward hill—with everyone to assist but no one to assist. After all, this is my battle, it is my journey, and it is my road.

I am still determined, but now it is for my daughter. With newly found strength, I am by my daughter. And I have a goal: my daughter.

My days are not just days. My concerns are not just....

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"What's for dinner?" or "Where will our next vacation be?"

Love between two people is more than just sexual or a habit of saying the three words.

The meaning of "family" is more than Thanksgiving dinner or long weekends together.

It is all different when you are constantly fighting depression, trying to pull yourself together and smile and be as normal as you can be.

Normal? But what is normal? How is normal? What was normal before my life fell face down on the ground?

I can't even remember.

It seems like a distant memory. It has only been eight months, but in these eight months I have felt more than my 33 years. I have felt pain, weakness, numbness and fatigue. I have had organs removed and dissected, and I have endured horrible side effects of painkillers that left me with gastrointestinal disorders, an inability to eat, and the lack of desire for delicious foods. I have spent more time in and out of hospitals and doctors' offices than with my friends. I now go in for scans the way I used to go to Starbucks, praying that each scan will not bring further bad news.

I feel the warmth and concern of family and friends; I see how people whom I have not seen in years still care and go that extra mile to show their concern. I have endured the long journey towards recovery only to start all over again, had even more pain, felt like a failure—an obstacle to mine and everyone else's dreams.

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I have felt stuck like an animal on a leash or in a cage, felt a bond of togetherness and sacrifice greater than any found in books about love, been a fighter stronger than the gladiators.

I am making an unknown journey, simultaneously alone and together, with a will to work but a need to fight for insurance, accommodation, and treatment options; a balance between lifestyle, logistics, and family.

I have made a decision for life that is challenging to live with, with access to the best facilities in the world but still limited in terms of options.

A mother's role continues even as she ages with no time to ponder or second-guess.

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I Will Eventually Win

I am by profession an engineer and disaster-management specialist and, by choice and interest, intrigued by human psychology, a dancer for life, and a follower of human religion.

I am forced by life to be a cancer patient.

I am blessed to have a beautiful daughter in whom I can observe human development at each stage.

"Metastasized stage-four cancer": When you first learn of your condition just days after a sudden ER visit, the world seems to flash right before your eyes.

You time travel, to the past and to the future.

You recall many things, from role-playing with your cousins and winning competitions to your first of many disagreements with your mother, and the journey from college to cultivating your career.

Then you move on to the plans you were working toward—buying a house; strengthening your career grip; building a playroom for your daughter; planning a second child; watching them grow; being there for your children as they face each and every obstacle into youth and adulthood.

The likelihood of this future seems to be in question as many new thoughts arise.

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First and foremost: "How long will I have?" and "Until when do I plan?" and "What do I plan for?"

The unknown is limitless and the known is scarce.

As you step forward, the future awaits you. With each step forward, the future dangles. It is time to redo your plans.

All the physics, mathematics, and statistics that I had grown to love and understand fail when I try to make sense of what has suddenly happened.

Where is the "equilibrium" factor? A force equals mass and energy.

What equation do I fall into? I look at the statistics, and I cannot even apply it to my situation. There is no statistic for a 33-year-old female with metastatic renal cell carcinoma and with a rare, unclassified subtype, who also underwent an aggressive surgery to remove a kidney, part of the liver, and a lung due to the metastasis.

There is no blog or forum where I can find another case similar to mine. The world's best cancer centres have no similar cases. So where are my statistics? How do I compare and how can I make my plans?

There is too little information. I am optimistic, looking forward to 15 or 20 or 30 years. I know it is a stretch for someone with stage four.

But I believe in beating the odds.

In mathematics there is a control factor. There are days when I laugh and am full of energy, and then there are many more days when I have no taste for food because I feel full and even nauseous. Some unknown pain penetrates deeply, and sometimes I have no muscle

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or bone to lift me off the couch. With three weeks comes some good. The next six weeks are not so good; that has been the new fact, the new "normal" of my life for four months now, since January.

It feels like nothing less than a battleground when you are defeated physically and emotionally, again and again, month after month.

It seems my own body is betraying me.

I have no control over the functioning of my cells. The bad cells within me are part of my own cells. To fight with it is to fight with myself. My cancer cells will also die with me. Cancer can never be the winner.

But as a soldier, I will stand again because this battle is not nearly over.

It has just started and I will fight.

I will lose but eventually win.

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*"Even as one after another line of treatment refused to show expected positive result, Neha did everything to keep normalcy in her life and around her.*

*She moved into a new apartment at the beginning of 2016. She asked her father Deepak to build a deck in his backyard that leads to a lake and bought canoes to go in the water. She planned trips with family including one to Puerto Rico. She bought furniture for her apartment and more for the patio.*

*The last things she did when she knew that she did not have much time left in this world, requiring pain medication and a wheelchair for the effort, she submitted work reports from her hospital bed with a ventilator mask on.*

*Because of the way she approached life, and how she carried on, many never thought that she would be with us for such a short time. So it reduced anxiety and made living easier.*

*Right till the time came. Then Neha let others make decisions and carry their burdens of heart while she gradually eased into another world.*

*On her passing her father cited her" joie de vivre" and said, "She taught that disease should not defeat your spirit of living, even if it is to take your life."*

*Then he broke down.*

**- Arun Koul, family friend**

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PART II

MY MUSINGS

In the following pages, I wish to share some of my musings as I've been battling this disease. What follows is a collection of some of my most pressing thoughts. Perhaps you find yourself asking the same questions when faced with a similar situation. My hope is that when you read the following, you understand that my perspective is one that is shaped when you know your days are numbered. There is a pressing irony to it all: when faced with the idea of dying, you suddenly understand living.

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Medical Limitations

Never expect justice in this world. That is not part of God's plan. Everybody thinks that if they don't get it, they're some kind of odd man out. And it's not true. Nobody gets justice - people just get good luck or bad luck.

-Orson Welles

We keep talking about a cure. Eat this; it will cure cancer. Drink this; it will cure cancer. Don't eat this; don't drink this. The word *cure* is too loosely thrown around these days. It gives false expectations to caregivers and loved ones alike, who are fighting a battle alongside someone who is suffering.

What does not kill us via viruses outside, kills us via those viruses inside. There are just different names for them, and some fancy ones at that. What killed many a hundred years ago, we now have a vaccination to prevent or a cure for. What is killing us today, we may have a cure for it years from now, and a hundred years from now there will be something new killing us that we will be struggling to find a cure for. Our bodies, just like the world, are constantly evolving.

And our bodies are just as, if not more, complex than this universe. Each human body is like its own galaxy in itself. *Complexity* is actually an understatement.

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We may know anatomy or have some depth of knowledge about how the body operates, but beyond that we know so very little. Even doctors who study and have experience know very little, not because they are not smart enough or knowledgeable enough but because the field is so complex.

Scientists who have dedicated their lives to understanding galaxies accept the fact that we have learnt a lot over the years and yet we still know very little. Such is the study of the human body. Our body is so craftily and uniquely built and so different from the one sitting next to us—and not just in personality or looks. Even twins born seconds apart are different inside, even if they are identical.

Attempting to understand this fully would require an infinite amount of time. And this understanding is not entirely possible in one human life. We do not set a bar for scientists, so why set one for doctors? It is not like learning law or building machines (digital or hardware); we humans created these. We know the margin of error.

If a machine breaks, we know how to fix it. If a criminal breaks a law, we know how to punish him. We humans wrote the laws. We humans designed the machines.

Those solutions are easier.

But human bodies, just like galaxies, were not built by humans, and if we ask people who study or practice medicine, they will, in fairness, admit the little they know.

This is where statistics or probabilities can succeed or fail, where the answers can be same or entirely

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differently. It isn't a case such as a judge deciding the future of a person or ruling on a law, or a CEO directing the future of a company or being bailed out by the government, or a president representing billions of its citizens and making decisions that can affect them, or the top IT guy programming something or hacking into a system.

All these positions are extremely hardy, but the human element is still present.

What do we do when the human element is taken out—when science is not controlled by us, humans? We do not have the solution, and neither do doctors attempting to cure patients or scientists attempting to understand the universe.

So let us just accept this and give them a break.

Our bodies are not black and white. The healthiest, fittest person can end up having cancer or any other health problem, curable or not, and can fail to live his or her statistically probable lifespan. And the moderately healthy or even unhealthy person can have minimal health issues and live a long life. A person with a terminal disease who is in a coma and basically waiting for death can be miraculously cured and live to tell the tale.

I am a 34-year-old woman who now has stage-four kidney cancer, and I found out about a year and half ago when I had just turned 33. Kidney cancer is common among 60-plus males who also happen to be heavy smokers. It does not so commonly occur in a 30-plus female who has not smoked a day in her life. These are all pure statistics. I also happen to have a sub-type of kidney cancer that is found in only two to five percent of the population. And my two metastases are in common

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places, liver and lung, but my third metastasis, located in my pelvic region, is also pretty rare—too rare to even have its own percentage.

So when people ask me,

"Why?" I do not know and neither do the doctors.

"How?" I do not know and neither do the doctors.

"Solution?" I do not know how clear that answer is, and neither do the doctors.

It is just a trial-and-error situation.

As frustrating as it is to hear this, as a science student, it makes complete sense. Here is what I do know: *Just as likely as this was to occur is the probability that I will beat this.* I know that much and so do the doctors.

It is just difficult to make your loved ones understand that. And because of this, I have not put all my eggs in one basket: I am trying allopathy, nutrition/diet, alternative medicines, and God, because if the solution were simple, we would have solved it by now and no one would be dying of cancer.

God is not making only those who have bad karma or are bad people or who are not believers suffer. Doctors are not only saving the good, young and innocent patients. Viruses outside or inside are not only attacking bad people. Bad nutrition can put you at risk of many things, but just juicing will not save you from getting any of those diseases.

It is true that we are what we eat, but DNA—neutrons and protons and a billion trillion cells—made us before we even started putting food in our mouths. There is no rule book, and this is not a court.

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Viruses that attack the human body do not pick and choose,

thinking, "Who am I going to attack now?"

It is randomly synchronized.

Our bodies function so well without us even thinking about it: how we breathe, how we cough when there is irritation in our throats, how we develop fevers to try to fight infections—we do not tell our bodies to do any of that. We do not eat certain fruits and vegetables to do so; our bodies just do those things.

And similarly, just as randomly organized, our bodies can do things that can make us not function so well. A person who is a vegetarian can have a heart attack, and a person who eats fatty foods may never have one. A person who exercises and eats healthy foods can get lung cancer, and a person who has been a chain smoker for 30 years may never become sick. Bad habits can always increase our health risks but may not necessarily cause our illnesses.

Logic does not always apply to the human body. And it is most critical to understand that and accept it.

The problem with data is that it is only as good as the quantity of data collected over a given period of time. Data in no way can reflect the facts or the truth. It only reflects some aspects of facts or truth, but never the whole

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Lonely Journey

We're born alone, we live alone, we die alone. Only through our love and friendship can we create the illusion for the moment that we're not alone.

-Orson Welles

They say you should have friends and family around for support. Yes, they are the biggest help for physical support and when you are incapable and need someone to go with you for treatment.

But to share fears or just simply discuss your case is not easy. They do not want to hear you complain or learn about your fears or concerns. You may just want to talk and share, but they do not know how to react to this, and will say one has to "be positive."

My sharing does not mean that I am not positive.

If my behaviour is aloof or distant, then, yes, you can throw your so-called encouraging words into the mix and say, "Be positive."

People do not always know when we are "being positive" or when we are "facing the facts." And people do not always know how to deal with those moments.

Friends and family are often clueless. If you say everything is "fine" when it is not, that is not necessarily

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being positive. You are just hiding things or do not want others to know or to be bothered. And in such cases, people say, "Oh, I'm here. You can talk to me."

Their intentions are good, but they do not know anything about how to give emotional support. It seems we should just pretend and not share, tell people we are "fine", no matter what is happening inside.

We are truly alone in this journey. No one can understand and no one ever will.

Each journey is different, and no two people will experience the same situations, so it is difficult to imagine or relate to. And they try to understand, may be relying on what they have seen or heard, but other people's journeys may be worse or better, so there is really no comparison.

Others may have detected cancer early, had a few treatments, and then were in remission. Or they had cycles of chemo with no side effects or many side effects or, worst of all, underwent everything and still did not make it.

None of this is my story. So talking about a person who had cancer and now is fine means nothing. It is like saying that this person went to college and is now a CEO. That is not going to be true of all people who go to college.

We all are alone, but we have a constant need not to "feel alone." So we create gatherings and communities, lead crusades, build countries, and access the World Wide Web—a web for communication, interaction, gathering, and sharing information, feelings, and thoughts about our current and future lives. We are

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constantly searching for a partner, a friend, a stranger to share a moment with—searching for everyone and anyone to fill that gap that makes us feel alone.

We are not soloists. We live with and lean on one another. That makes us stronger.

We human beings need to communicate. And we all have needs. Some of us have bigger needs, some of us have smaller needs, but we all have needs and we are bound by them.

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Quality of Life

Quality of life: What does that mean?

You cannot sit, eat, move, or brush without pain—not because you just have fatigue but also because you physically are not able to. The painful blisters in your mouth burn. You can't pick your daughter up.

Doctors talk about quality of life and quantity of life and ask me to make choices. I still cannot understand what choice I am supposed to make.

My question is, what is it they are calling quality of life?

I have already stopped seeing any quality of life. Probably controlling pain and seducing with narcotic medicines make up quality of life for many doctors.

I am here looking for normal people's quality of life, and doctors are talking about a dying person's quality of life: just controlling symptoms.

All night I was disturbed with heartburn and a massive headache. I had to get up and throw up. I ate a banana and took Advil for a headache. The heartburn subsided. A half hour later, I felt heartburn again and threw up what I ate.

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More frustration: here I should be focusing on my career and settling in, and instead I am dealing with how to feel comfortable even for one hour or deciding what medicines to take. And not knowing how long I have or what the quality of my life will be, for however long I have, is frustrating.

No one knows anything, and that is frustrating.

For a change I went to a restaurant with my family in New York. People at a crowded table next to us were cheering over whisky, laughing, sharing stories over cups of tea. It was not too loud; there was just enough of a joyous sound all around and then perhaps loud laughter or a distant "thank you" and a hug.

There I was, lost in the middle of all the happiness and laughter. It would have been difficult to imagine anyone there was suffering inside, as I was, or was analysing what quality of life is for a cancer patient like me.

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*"There are heartbreaks, and then there are hearts bulldozed with rollers of grief. There is pain, and then there is pain that engulfs you completely and does not let you breathe. There is anguish, and then there is overwhelming anguish that threatens your very existence. There are moments when you question God, and then there are moments when you question your own existence."*

**– Sunanda Vashisht, cousin**

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My Real God

During this journey I often hear people express thoughts about, discuss, give advice on, and encourage me to have faith and believe in God. Sometimes I get asked, "What is your belief in God?" I tell them, honestly, that I do not know. I do believe there is some cosmic force that is beyond our control and understanding. In the traditional sense, I went from being an avid believer to one in a state of questioning.

God has a different meaning for me and I think that messenger of God is Someone, who acts as the catalyst for spreading "good" in humanity. So, in our history, we do not just have one person who performs this Herculean task alone. At different stages in history, there were various people who came and spread "good" around, and they were called *Gods*. So we pay our respects to all those individuals whom we now consider divine, and ask for the same strength to do or be even 10 percent of what they did or who they were.

I have come to realize one truth during this journey and finally found my peace in an answer.

My God, the power of the *mantras/shlokhs*, is here, and it lies in my family. His Love came to me in the form of unconditional love and support that was showered on

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me by my family. I realized my prayers were answered soon after my surgery. I have been blessed.

My parents are my God; my family is my God.

To me, there are two types of Gods: one that people believe in and one whom I have gotten to know. But for me personally, there is only one God. From birth to the end, there is only one, collectively, who loves unconditionally, gives unconditionally, and sacrifices without limits. In good times and bad times they—family members—stand tall and strong behind us. Does not that describe the God that we all have grown up hearing about?

First and foremost, they are our parents. I pray that no child will have to endure tough times, but when they occur, parents' support is valuable beyond words. Parents are the ones I have my faith in. They make up the real God.

It is impossible for any child to have enough words to express gratitude to parents. All parents do so much—and then more—for their children. In my instance, it has been beyond more. At an age when I should be caring for them, they are once again caring for me, but this time around with a lot more stress. I would not wish what they have gone through, especially at their age, to happen to any parent.

I know there is scientific reasoning behind what creates and destroys us all—all organisms, planets and the universe. To understand it, though, is beyond our control, and to give it any name reflects our innocence (childish foolishness).

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Yet to such a complicated disease we have given a simple name: cancer.

There are so many complexities to cancer that are beyond our understanding; if we fully understood them, we would be sitting here with a cure for the disease. But if we have not understood that much, then how can we claim we know the name of one who creates and destroys us? The course of humanity cannot be governed or described in one book, by one thought, by one being, but by a collection of books, by many thoughts, by many men and women who emerged during a period in which humankind needed direction, new ways of life.

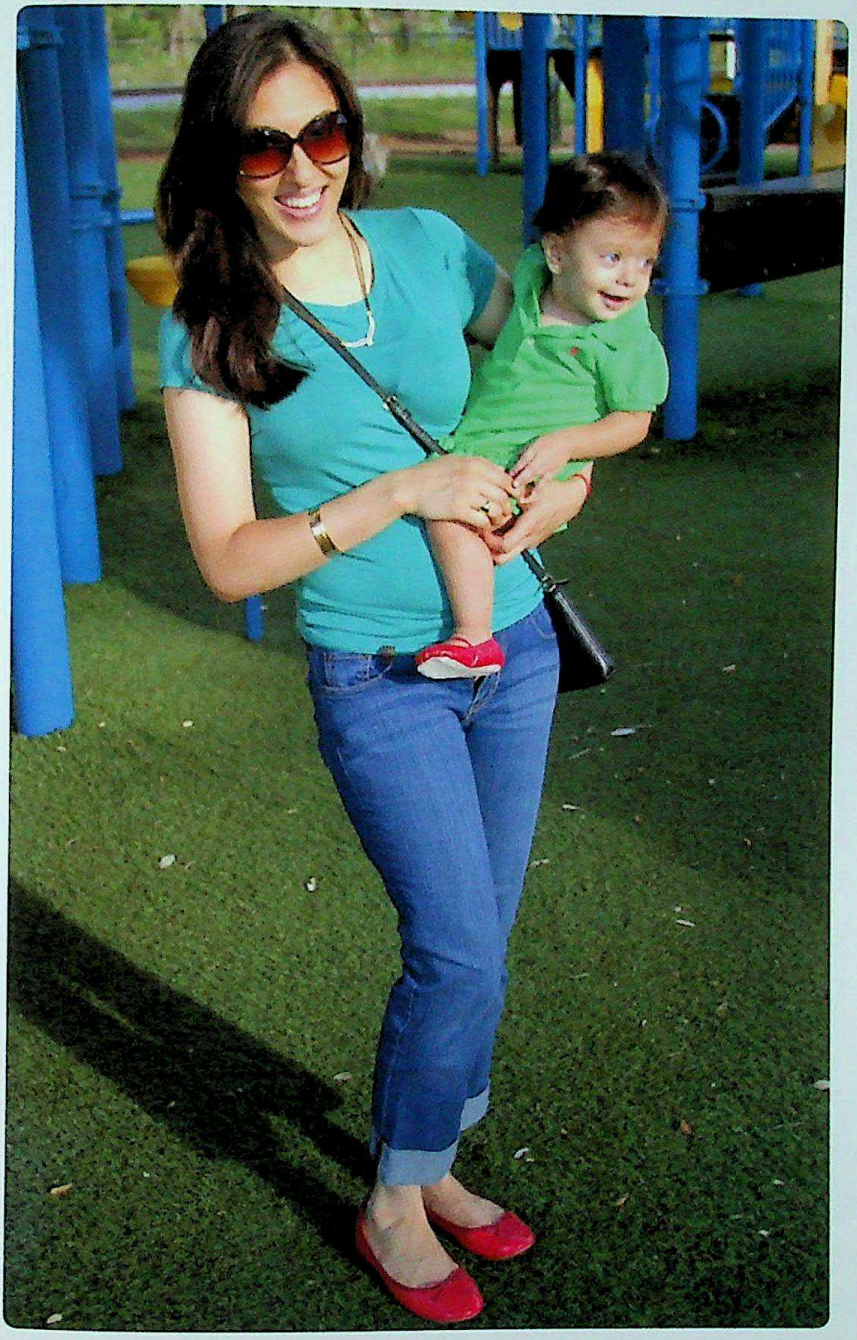
They came during the Dark Ages to take us into a golden period so there cannot be one path for all.

My take on religion is totally different. For me, it is a spiritual path. God is the name of a supreme power that governs all of us—humans, animals, plants, planets and this whole Universe. Super power gave us all the necessities to survive, to feel, to belong. God is the power we call love, and where there is love, there is God. We feel the power of love when we have known it for years. We can even feel it for someone we just met or for someone we only smile at, not just for some with whom we are intimate.

Someone who feels genuine love within has God within, and it can come in any form. My God does not let me deny love. I call my religion human religion. To me human religion is to love humanity.

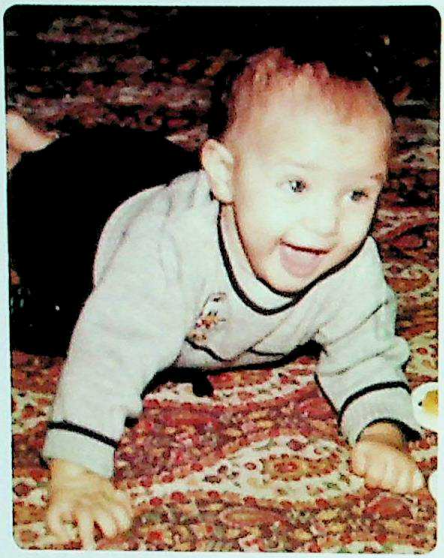
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While her beauty and charm would light up the surroundings, her incomparably pure soul could deeply touch people's hearts

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Little angel appeared, spread colourful fragrance in the universe, & merged into it

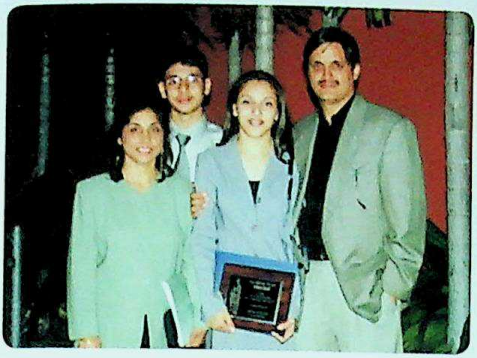


Baby Neha holding her favourite doll



Baby Neha fussing on eating food

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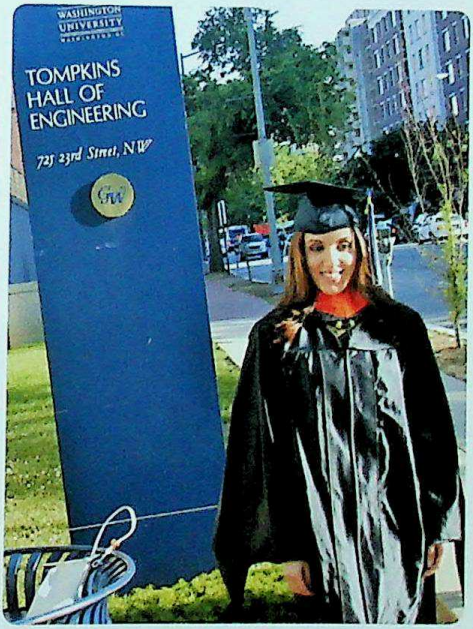
Silver Knight Award Ceremony



High School award for community service



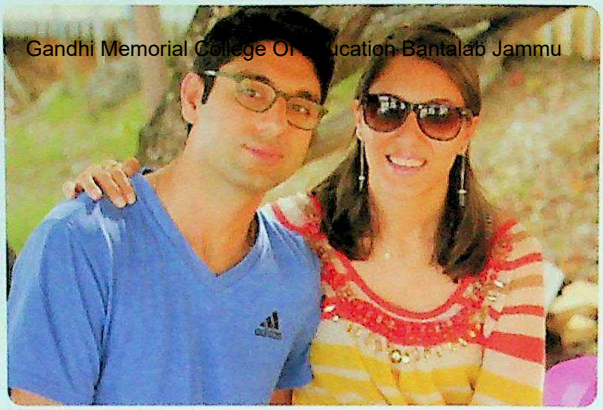
Visa Dance Competition



Masters of Engineering Graduation 2009

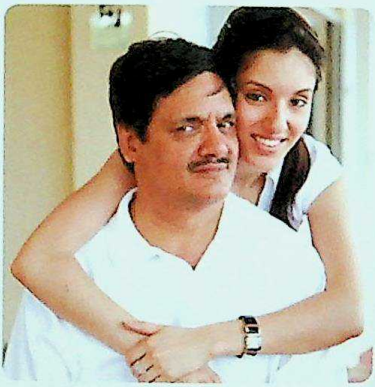
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Neha with her brother Nihar who stood with her like a rock during her tough time





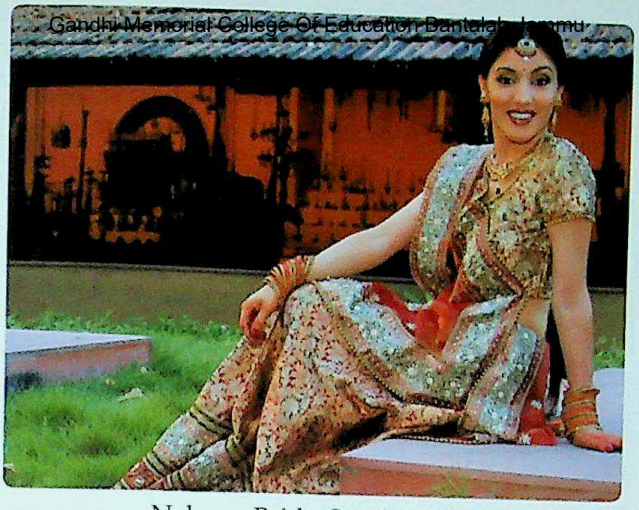
We are truly blessed parents who had such an angelic daughter



Neha with Mother Chandra and Grandmother Bhabhi

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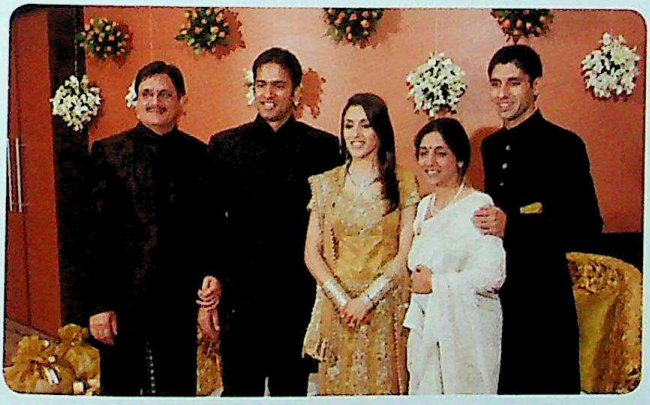
Neha as Bride-October 2010



Neha as Bride



Mother and Grandmother adoring Neha to be Bride



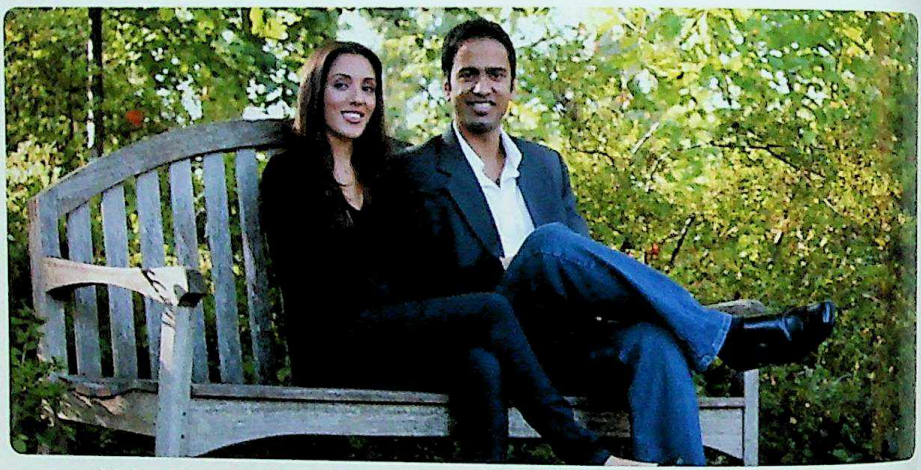
'Some memories are unforgettable'
Neha's Wedding Reception

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Honeymoon couple at Tihiti-2011



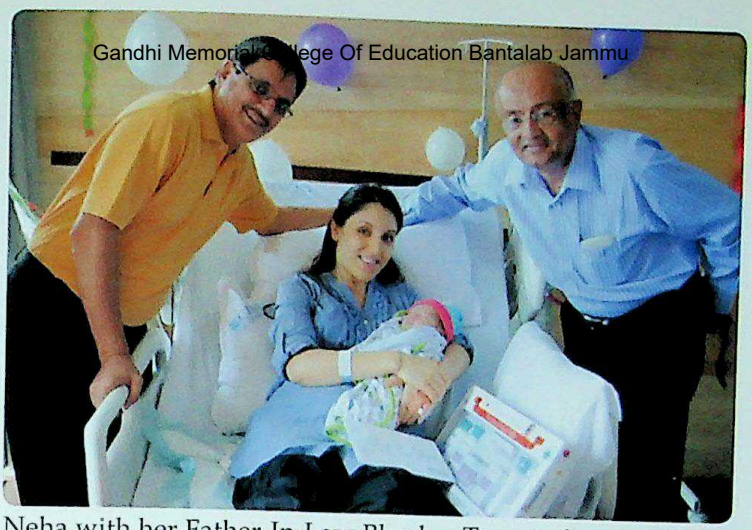
Neha loved to keep treasure of sweet moments and memories
Photo courtesy Dana L. Jung -2011



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Living a dream of a happy family

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Neha with her Father-In-Law Bhaskar Tanna who considered her a jewel of his family



Neha with her husband Kartikeya and his parents on Aariyana's first birthday, 2014



Aariyana's second birthday August 2015

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Neha and Kartikeya at Kutch 2014



Aariyana and Neha's kissing moments- March, 2015



Full of care and love for everyone she ever met, she had an innate ability to warm the saddest of hearts



Neha with her parents and Kartikeya at Capitol Hill attending Conference to address Kashmir issue

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Celebration of Life

Thankfully, my parents and my mother in particular always encouraged us to perform. My fond memories of childhood are mostly of me performing in India and the United States, whether it was dancing, playing the violin, sitar or harmonium, or singing classical compositions. Every weekend we were on a stage or in front of a gathering.

It became part of us so much that my cousin and I created our own dance group, and we would be found putting together a two-hour show on every occasion and holiday.

This fondness for performing continued into my adulthood, and one thing it has taught me is that whether there is a wardrobe malfunction, a skip in a CD, a sudden blown fuse, or a stage that shakes as we dance.

But the show must go on.

And life is no different.

My childhood was pretty damned perfect, and I thought my adulthood would be, too. I lived each moment thinking, "I don't want to leave this world with any regrets." But as I stand here, I think of so many things that I wish did not happen or happened differently. I made many mistakes, said many wrong

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things...but I kept moving—looking forward and moving ahead.

Because the show must go on.

And then there are many, many other beautiful memories I have along the way. I have been blessed with many loving people in my life. The past couple of years have not been easy for many obvious reasons, and to add the burden of thinking - "When will it be your last?" - every day is quite daunting.

But in these years, I remembered most what my parents taught me.

When we were growing up, my parents did not have it easy, but they never made us feel their struggle or stress. They made us enjoy every moment, even in the state of emergency that led to their reestablishing themselves not once but twice. What we had, we enjoyed, so much so that I think that I had the best childhood ever! People talk about it, but I had already lived through this once, unknowingly.

So why not now?

I tried to apply that thinking in these past years: cherishing the good days, enjoying the good moments, making time for good company. I have said that I do not want everyone at my funeral crying as they remember me. Before that day comes, I want to see everyone, hug them, talk to them, and celebrate the memories we created together by dancing and laughing.

That is the life I want for myself and for my loved ones. I do not know how long I have and I do not care.

And the show must go on.

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Dear friends, I have known some of you for over 15 years and one in particular for 20 years. Many friends came to visit, our friendships having stood the test of time and distance. It has not been an easy road; so much has happened and changed. We have gone through many ups and downs. But time and time again, the strength of friendship shone.

So now it is time to celebrate this!

There are many reasons to celebrate. I did not get to celebrate my bachelorette party or baby shower with all of you as I had hoped, but more importantly I think it is time that we got to celebrate friendship.

Because show must go on.

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*"In her final moments, Neha taught us how to fight life's toughest battles with a smile and without ever complaining about it. She was an amazing friend and a better daughter, sister, wife and above all a devoted mother. She reminded us that our life's journey is truly shaped by the people who touch our lives.*
*Consequently, Neha will always have a very special place in our hearts because she has touched us all with her courage, beauty, intelligence and kindness.*

**- Siten and Sonal, friend**

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"But just when my smile of great memories turns into tears of sorrow, I hear you again…the giggles followed by a bellyful of laughter, the frequent bear hugs, and the eyes full of sparkle and spirit blinking back at me. You left us a gift, the gift of sunshine. When I see Aari, I see you. The memories I share with her, I feel as though I'm sharing with you. Where she is, I imagine you there also… Knowing that somewhere you're laughing at what happened brings a smile back to my face."

- Emily Rodriguez, friend

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Aariyana: My Baby

Mother's Advice

Life is short.
Words are many.
Prayers are numerous and blessings limitless.
Live your life on your terms,
But make your actions count.
Make your journey matter.
Have no regrets, but don't repent if you do.
I may or may not be there, but my hand is always with yours.
Perform deeds that you always get blessings for, not only for family, but for all people.
Touch lives, make an impact, and leave a mark.
Fame may come.
But don't be fooled by the spotlight.
It is temporary.
Opportunities may arise; ready or not, take the challenge.
Become stronger, brighter, and a champion in the field.
Always have a plan B.
Learning isn't just in school or college.
It is every day, especially after the official learning phase.
Learn from all, at every phase. Your mind will thank you.
Teach by example, action, and innovative methods.

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Don't ever become complacent in any field, professional or personal (wife, mother, daughter...).

Complacency is a virus that refuses to leave once it captures you.

Don't ever judge anyone. One never knows the full story and circumstances.

Try to put yourself in the other person's shoes.

Keep your eyes open. Keep broadening your mind, and take delight in life's endless beauty.

Travel as much as possible. Meet people from all parts of the world. Absorb each culture.

For a year and a half, I was with you;

But through all the rough times, you made it easy for all of us. I hear you crying upstairs; it sounds like you got hurt. My heart runs to you, to console you. I want to run and grab you and give you a million kisses. I miss you so much. I am so sorry that I have not been able to attend to you or, until yesterday, see you in the past two weeks. It breaks my heart.

For 17 months, you and I were together every day, sleeping together every night, and now it has been two weeks, and it will be another two weeks before I can again be normal—be your mother.

You have no idea how tough it is for me to stay away from you, to hear your cry and not attend to you, to hear you get excited and not excite you further, to hear you groan and not take you to your potty seat. When I was away in the hospital, I would imagine your normal routine. I miss waking up early with you cuddling close to me, gazing at the ceiling, then slowly trying to wake us, pointing at the door, and saying *buhba* ("Let's go out"). I miss your crawling over me to get to the edge

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of the bed and sliding down, pointing at me and then at the door, again saying *buhba*.

Daddy would eventually give in and take you out. You would get so excited to get out and go to the kitchen and living room while demanding your next need, *dudhu* (milk). You would get so impatient while the bottle was being prepared.

Finally you would feel victorious as you got the bottle in hand and pointed at the corner on the sofa where you needed to be to finish your meal. Watching Mickey Mouse and having your *dudhu* (milk): such a happy place that is in our hearts.

"In my arms lies Sleeping Beauty – so delicate, so gentle, and so beautiful." -NG

I imagine you getting cranky, getting bathed, getting changed, getting dressed, going to the park, and getting excited to play on the rides. These thoughts give me so much happiness inside, just as much as I miss you.

I hope that I am able to share this with you in person, but, in case I am not, I am starting a journey not only to leave my footprint behind but to share what I would have liked to say to you in conversation. I hope you find a bond while reading this, as I am in writing it.

These are my personal and private experiences that I would have shared with you at various points of your life:

Childhood

Youth

Adulthood

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Career

Finding the one

Marriage

Motherhood

Suffering

Death

God

A lot of don'ts

A lot of dos

Honestly, if I did not have you in my life and had been without responsibilities, I would not have even fought against what was naturally happening in my body. I always assumed that when my time comes, which in my mind was at age 80-plus, I would create a Will that would allow me to leave this world peacefully without hospital visits and external forces to keep me alive. When my time comes, it would come, and I would not extend my life.

But when I turned 33 and was about to start a new job, moving back to the United States from India to live alone with my 15- month-old, I was not ready to accept that *this* was my time. How could it be? I had just started learning to live fully. I had hardly learned to live with you, and we still had to face the world together, from the terrible twos through the teen-trouble phase.

You would either lose or win numerous competitions. I would teach you how to ride a bike, then to drive a car, to sing, to dance, to make a fool of yourself, to stand up with pride. I would watch you fall

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in love, have your heart broken (hopefully never), fulfill your dreams, and so much more.

We had just started—how could this be my end? I had a plan. I always had a plan but no plan included this possibility. No plan of mine was working out. Basically, I needed to quit planning. But that is like telling a lion to quit hunting.

Death was confronting me, face-to-face, every day, but I refused to look into its eyes, even though it was the easier way out of the physical suffering I was enduring. If I did not have you, then may be I would have called it quits long before. But you were here, facing me and telling me to hold your hand. You were telling me to walk with you long way.

You were a precocious child. At 15 months, you could tell that Mommy had changed and Mommy could not be disturbed. Your sense of care and affection startled all of us and continued to give us courage.

You would copy me when I was sitting on a chair; you would put pillows all around to support my fragile body, keeping a turtle pillow on my stomach for support and a salmon blanket to keep my legs warm. You would watch as I took my medicine and would be fascinated with the bottle, and I would tell you, *Chhee chhee* (yuck!), so that you would not think it was something delicious I was having, and that you would not think you should have some as well.

You would enjoy gardening with Nanu (grandfather) and pluck flowers and bring them to me. You would let me sleep and tell others, "Shh," so as not to disturb me. You would call Nanu to massage my

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back. You would call Papa ji (my grandfather) to put his hand on my head and pray for me, as you had watched him everyday doing so and praying for my recovery.

You did so much for me, and you had not even turned two yet.

Though you could not express it with words, your understanding was grave and spoke far beyond what many could, who did have words.

You gave me strength and will. I just wanted 30 more years with you. I just wanted at least to see you settled in career and get married. This was my goal, my dream, my new plan. I had to fight death for you. Rather, I had to fight to keep my life a bit longer.

I have made mistakes—many of them. I will never forget them. Rather, I remind myself of them regularly and try to not repeat them. I speak what I think or what I believe is right, and many times I have inadvertently hurt someone in the process. I do not know what is right or wrong—honestly, I do not believe in right or wrong.

There is no right or wrong. Both are only personal perceptions. Each individual has his or her own beliefs about what is right and what is wrong. I believe it is wrong to impose your beliefs on others. In the end you have to live with your thoughts and actions, so you just have to be true to yourself in every act. Individuality is the only right and the only fact. You are your own advocate. And you are a child only up to a certain age.

"I have made many mistakes but I have done one right thing – you." - NG

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You have to stand up for what you believe in. Otherwise, it will haunt you for the rest of your life. In other words, you will have regrets, be they about your career choice, relationships with dear ones, love, or your rights. But never feel guilty about what you feel is right. Fight for yourself and others.

Time is the fastest, no-bullshit machine. Respect it. Do not waste it. It does not come back.

Remember:

Always remember your roots: where you came from; how you got here; who helped you in each phase; and why you are standing tall and upright, facing life's challenges.- NG

Don'ts

Do not be judgmental. No one is perfect. You are not perfect. You are growing and changing, and so are others. We give ourselves second chances every day, so why would we not do the same for others? Give yourself a second chance every day, and do not shy away from doing the same for others.

Do not get fooled. Know where to draw the line. Be smart about realizing that you do not need to remain part of a situation in which you are being harmed in any way—emotionally or physically. Get out. Forgive freely but forget rarely. Respect yourself, and others will respect you. Respect others, and others will respect you. Stay in control, but enjoy life to the fullest. Losing yourself is your biggest loss.

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Do not blame others for your actions. Life is a fine balancing act. You walk on a thin rope from one end to another. Find and calculate your balance. There is no one to blame but yourself if you lose balance.

Do not give up. Do not say, "I can't." You can and you will. Do not bash yourself. When something is done, move on past it.

Do not take anyone's nonsense. Do not have blind faith.

Do not jump to conclusions. Do not believe everyone you hear or see; there usually is more than what meets the eye. Do not just tag along.

Do not be quick to define yourself. You are flowing water, constantly evolving and adapting.

Do not smoke. Do not drink. Do not do drugs.

Do not put yourself in a situation where you cannot get out. Think before each act.

Do not be aggressive. Do not raise your voice in an argument; it does not serve any purpose and only creates noise.

Do not hide the truth. Do not assume.

Do not backstab. Do not make fun of others. Do not be a bystander to a wrongdoing—take action.

Do not run in heels.

Do not manipulate people. Do not insult your loved ones in front of others, even jokingly. Do not make private matters public.

Do not forget your mistakes and do not repeat them.

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Do's

Do imagine. Do dream and then work towards your dreams to make them come true.

Do dance without music.

Do sing in the bathroom and in your car, even if you have a bad voice.

Do travel the world.

Do something that you would not normally do. Do take chances.

Do wear bright red lipstick when you feel powerful.

Do share.

Do take classes just for fun (you will probably get a chance in college or during your career).

Do defy the odds.

Do keep reading.

Do defend what is right. Do speak the truth. Do search for the truth. Do trust your instincts. Do stand up for yourself. Do become what your heart desires. Do everything you can to keep yourself happy.

Do follow your inner voice. Do believe in yourself.

Do meet people often. Do meet different people with different backgrounds.

Do stay in touch with as many loved ones as you can.

Do keep learning. Do good research. Do make pros and cons lists. Do remain practical but a little emotional.

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Do cry. Do trust someone completely. Do remain presentable.

Do enjoy hot baths and massages. Do spoil yourself every once in a while. Do behave like the lady you are and want to be treated as.

Do make mistakes.

Do respect your elders. Do make a difference.

Live freely, love freely, give freely.

Big hearts win big battles.

Stinginess is not in our nature.

Must Do

Read all religious books, the Gita, Koran, Bible, and others. Read Rabindra Nath Tagore, Khalil Gibran, Ghalib, Rumi, Plato and other philosophers. And find your points of agreement and draw your own conclusions as to what you believe in. And if you do not choose to believe in anything, that is fine, too. But do not ever disrespect any belief or thought. Respect each way of life.

We all have to find our journeys and our reasons to live and survive in this world. We cannot be so foolish as to think we will all choose the same way to the same end. We have to find our own paths. Do not be afraid to take risks. Take risks, experiment and experience but go where your heart and soul, not your impulses, guide you.

There will be many people, close loved ones, who will, at different times in your life, guide you and help

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you understand what religion and culture mean to them. But I ask you to embark on your own quest. In life nothing is permanent; what remains is only knowledge and use it with wisdom.

What will be the next big things that you cannot imagine, while the dreamers and the achievers see only those things?

In order to know what you can succeed or fail at, you must give things a try. Not every try will lead to a success, but you should not give up after a failure. What each try teaches you is what you are naturally drawn towards, and once you know that, do not give it up, whether you continue it as a hobby or a career.

Your career can be your passion, but it has to be made by means of a logical choice. Find a way that you can pursue your passion and still be able to provide yourself and your family with a living. If passion and livelihood can be distilled into one thing, then that is living the dream.

You control your mind. No one else and nothing else controls you. Take breaks from everyday life. Ponder over what you truly want from life. Regroup and work towards it.

You are like a flower and you should bloom by yourself.

I truly wish I were there to tell you a million stories about me and my experiences as I grew up, and to be with you every day. You slept in my arms every night.

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I felt your breath and your heartbeat every day. I took millions of pictures, trying to capture as many things as possible about you at each phase. We travelled alone together, to Mumbai and then to the United States, just you and me. You were my companion, my best friend.

Suddenly I could not care for you as I had. Suddenly I had to be away from you for days, weeks and months. All this must have been hard for you and was deeply heartbreaking for me.

It shattered me to see you being taken care of by three men—great grandfather, grandfather and father, as I sat back recovering or watching you on FaceTime while getting treatment at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York.

Tough times? I could only hope to get more time and days and years with you.

If there is anything I want you to take away from my life, it is always to give a helping hand. Human relations are the most precious gift we have and live with. I truly believe that being there for one another is our purpose in life. Never shy away from helping others or going that extra step.

I truly think the journey of the person is important to understand a person fully. The journey defines you as much as your actions do. I hope, besides the stories I have shared with you, that people who knew me share their version of who they thought I was: the good, the bad, the ugly, and the criticisms included.

Because a person is not just one definition but all facets of truth. To truly love, understand, trust and value a person, one must know the journey that led to where

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the person ended up. And then, you accept that journey and the present person.

Remember that nothing is constant...this is what love is. I do not want you to love me just because I am your mother but because you know the person I was.

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*"You left us your 'Love of life', a ray of light, divine, bundle of joy, beautiful gift called Aariyana. Her long silky, soft and golden hair, a reminder of how beautiful you were, and your face we see in her every moment. Her smile, her warmth, her charisma, her mannerisms are everything of you that we see in her. She is now the reason for our living and the only thing that really matters to us in the world."*

**- Chandramukhi Ganju, Mother**

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"Neha was the jewel in our crown. She was quite capable of being the Dharohar (pillar) of the family in the future. Her void will never be filled. She has given us little /Nanhi Neha in the form of her sweet and loving Aariyana. Neha was with us for a short time but left behind a wealth of nice memories."

- Bhaskar Tanna, father-in-law

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When You choose to get married

You have one life to live. Are you sure you want to spend that life with *this* man?

The right age for marriage is whenever you are truly ready, not just when your heart says you are ready.

In your *nani*'s (grandmother) time, after 25 was considered late, and, during my time, generally after 30 was pushing it.

However, you will meet those who got married while in college and those who have yet to marry in their mid-30s. In your time, marriage by 40 might be ok.

But remember that there is a gray area with every possibility.

After personally seeing the whole spectrum of marriage age, I have come to believe that –

1. During and before college days does not make sense. Your focus should be on building yourself and setting your direction.
2. After 30 is not smart, because your biological clock is asking for kids, and ideally you should have all your kids by 35 – at least have the first one by 35 to avoid the chance of birth defects or complications.

During my time, freezing your eggs was beginning

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to be popular, and girls who had not found their life mate were starting to consider doing it. But we did not know enough and did not know anyone, personally, who had chosen this path. Nor did we know "someone who knew someone" who could tell us how safe it was and how effective. It was not cheap either.

By your time this might be common, and you may even come to know many kids, younger than you, who resulted from in vitro fertilization.

Nonetheless, anytime we do anything unnatural, it is never the best option. But when there is no choice or other option, it is understandable. But it should not be your first choice.

3. The best and most natural time for marriage is between 25 and 30. You want to take enough time in your marriage before you have kids. With kids, your relationship with your husband takes a new direction, and your perspectives change.

So is best to explore, travel and understand each other before kids are "on the table."

Remember that finding the right man and getting married are two different things. You can wait until you are ready, when you have already found the right man. But to wait too long to find the right man is not smart. Experience has shown that after a certain age it gets hard, very hard, to find the "right" one.

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*"Seven years ago, we held each other's hands. To traverse our journeys together.*

*Awaiting her arrival as I sat on stage, we anticipated exchanging a few giggles as she'd walk towards me. The familiarity, we'd reckoned, wouldn't leave room for any nerves to surface.*

*The first glance, though, set in motion a gaze that'd stay all day.*

*It wasn't the beauty of the face. It wasn't the grandeur in the appearance.*

*What was it, I kept pondering. Words felt rather uninvited.*

*And, unimportant back then, as we commenced our lives together.*

*I'd endlessly wait to capture moments with a compact camera. Sensing the deep passion I had for photography, one that'd often deprive her of my full attention, she quietly bought and placed an SLR on my desk, a camera I still use.*

*When my wardrobe was found wanting, I'd find quality clothing strategically placed in the pile my nonchalant hands would predictably pick from.*

*In her last few days, a concern bigger than timely painkillers was to ensure that the bland but healthy hospital food that would be brought for her was kept for me so that I could eat it when I'd visit after the day's work.*

*No moment of grief or sadness, however acute, stood a chance against a few moments in her arms.*

*Words still elude me as I recall this day. To perhaps allow me to relive that moment when she walked towards me. To rediscover what I felt, unfettered by finite expressions.*

*She joined me in my journey seven years ago. And helped me be the man I am seven years hence and the one I live to be."*

**- Kartikeya Tanna, husband**

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*"The most pleasant time came when Kartikeya and Neha shifted to Ahmedabad. It was the best time. Suddenly our home became more lively and vibrant. Neha, a modern girl with all family values intact was a bright star in our sky.*

*She cared for everyone in our house: my 92 year old mother in-law, my husband Bhaskar and myself, especially during my knee surgery, even though she was pregnant.*

*Neha, you were like a pearl in my heart; like a Golden Peacock in my mind; you were like a diamond in our life, all shining and glittering.*

*A modern girl with all family values intact. We bade farewell to you a year ago, but I am sure sometime, somewhere we will meet. Maybe in a different body, in a different life. Our hearts will come to know."*

**- Divya Tanna, mother-in-law**

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Unconditional Love

Becoming a parent is an experience that every human being should have. It's an inexplicable emotion that can only be felt. When I became a parent 2 years ago, I even viewed my job, which I loved and worked hard at, differently. My daughter, Aariyana, brought meaning into my work, my life and my existence.

Last Saturday we celebrated Aariyana's 2nd birthday. I went all out. Since she started travelling when she was just 2 months old and in the past 2 years had already made 10 inter-state, 3 international and numerous road trips, I decided to a do a hot air balloon theme for her special day, the perfect whimsical tribute to her unending adventures.

I have also already planned out the next 5 years of her birthdays, with different themes for each year. Planning her birthdays gives me immense joy. Indeed it was a lot of work, as I meticulously planned out every detail, but it gave me internal joy. For me, it wasn't just celebrating a birthday, it was a celebration of the happiness, our daughter brought us every day and the lessons parenthood taught us. It was a celebration of an experience, which undoubtedly was worth celebrating.

It hasn't been easy being a professional, a wife, a daughter, a community member, a mother. Each role is

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a challenging task in itself, but I love all my roles in life. It doesn't just keep me busy; it makes me feel alive, and makes me wake up every day loving who I am.

This year we started a new tradition. We are celebrating Aariyana's birthday with orphaned girls in our community. At a very young age I want her to learn sharing something special with those less fortunate. My hope is that it cultivates an understanding in her that life has many colours not just the one we see and live in.

Seven years ago, as a graduation gift, my father and I travelled throughout India . We visited many temples, hill stations, and to the southern tip of India, however we never made it to Mumbai.

In May 2007, I decided to take another trip and I landed in the city that never sleeps for the first time, I was alone.

My carry-on and 2 checked bags were filled with donated books and school supplies. The only additional items I had were a pair of jeans, a few t-shirts, toiletries and the shoes I was wearing. Having paid extra for the overweight bags I couldn't afford to add weight with my personal items. The previous year, I started an initiative called "Books for India" where I gathered boxes of various books and school supplies for underprivileged kids in India. I asked for donations from the Indian embassy, but couldn't collect the funds to ship the books, so I decided to bring them myself.

Upon arriving, I checked into a hostel. My simple room had a bed, a desk, a bucket for showering and a

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window facing Bandra Basti and the Indian Ocean. It was a pleasant day. The helper placed my overweight bags in the room and I walked towards the window. The sky was foggy and far away I could see the sky meeting the sea. Nearby I could see the kids running after each other and the leader in front spinning a bicycle wheel with a stick. It was exactly as I imagined. It was simple; it was congested; it was beautiful; it was India.

The next day I walked to the bazaar to buy myself a few *Kurtis*, Indian tunics, to wear for the next 3 months. My first few days were a blur between my jet lag and getting adjusted to the city. One day I decided to take the rickshaw around the city from south Mumbai to Malad. I saw the Gateway of India, the Taj hotel, Juhu beach, and the multi-story newly opened posh malls. I ate all kinds of delicious street food including *pav bhaji*, *pakoda* sandwich, and *pani puri*. I wanted to experience the city as a local, and the food was certainly the most authentic off the streets. Luckily, I didn't get sick.

A week after my arrival, I started my work. I visited the spastic school, slum schools and a girls' orphanage. I worked Monday to Sunday 9 am to 9 pm. From Monday to Friday, 9 am till 2 pm, I worked with the teachers to develop the curriculum and create visual aids for the kids. I also helped the kids before, during and after class. From 5-8 am I worked while commuting through traffic. On the weekends, I taught them English, dance and arts. From 3 pm-4 pm, I got an hour for myself. I took the time to learn Kathak from a trained Kathak dancer Padma Bhushan, Ms. Kumari. Ms. Kumari knew I was there for only a short time, but happily took me under her wing, knowing that I was eager to learn the craft and I would visit her daily. It was a 15 minute walk

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from my hostel. Rain or shine, I walked and my guru welcomed me daily.

I spent most of time at the girls' orphanage; it became my home. Girls of all ages under one mother nun, from 1 month old to 14 years old lived there. There were older girls as staff to help with cooking and cleaning. A psychologist, who counselled the girls as their mothers were often prostitutes who were no longer alive or still working in the districts and had abandoned their children. There was also a doctor who visited weekly for checkups and on call, for emergencies, as many of the girls were born with HIV.

I learned that these girls that at such a tender age they had seen and understood so much that life had to offer, much more than I ever had, despite me being in my 20s. They didn't know their fathers, had been abandoned by their mothers and many were unaware if they had a sibling or two, and had to battle a deadly disease before even learning how to speak. However, they were eager to learn, take on challenges and opened their hearts to a stranger's love. It is here I felt the first pangs of maternal love. A little girl barely 4, shy yet always smiling, graceful yet naughty, her big eyes spoke so much than the few words she spoke. I felt an inexplicable bond with her that I felt in the deepest recesses of my heart.

Every day, I entered and was welcomed by all girls rushing towards me with big smiles on their faces, calling me "Didi" (older sister). When it was time to leave, they would become sad, follow me to the gate, hold my hand as I walked out and asked me to come early the next day. I had never felt such unconditional love.

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The girls had no expectations or demands; they were simply full of love. They would climb on me, jump on my back, hold my hand, make me laugh, ask for my help, and tell me to sing and dance. I felt alive every time, I was around them. I might have given them the clothes, books, and school supplies, but they gave me much more in return. They gave me the feeling of living a life with purpose and shared love that gave me the love I never asked for or expected. Life had robbed them already of too much, but it couldn't rob them of their love. They loved one another and everyone around them. It was contagious, and needless to say, I fell in love too. Spending everyday with them for 3 months, I became attached to each of them. I never wanted to leave them. I wanted to guide them through their life decision I promised myself that I would spend my retirement days in the orphanage.

To say it was rewarding is to say the least.

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*"Neha was a child who was full of energy and positivity, with a personality that inspired each and every one around her. She had come to Mumbai to work with the physically challenged and the slum kids, and was with them for couple months."*

**- Ashoke Pandit,**
**film director, activist and dear friend**

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Disaster Management

I specialized in and trained workers to provide, respond to and assist persons to recover from disasters, incidents or risks. But nothing can prepare you and your family for cancer. One is not prepared and has no choice but to respond, and, in many cases, you recover from it.

You become resilient as a person, following this journey. Though you may recover, no guarantees are given for cancer not recurring.

You now are vulnerable. You try to mitigate the risks and transform yourself to lead a healthier and happy life. You try to prepare for it by taking holistic help.

But nothing changes and impacts a community and family like a disaster or a disease like cancer. It is a life-changing event. You and the family will never be the same. But you are stronger, closer and hence more resilient.

Going through each scan is like preparing for a hurricane. You have all your window shutters up, ready for the outcome. You put in the hard work but hope there is no hurricane at the end of the day. Waiting for each report was like waiting in your house while the hurricane is supposed to make landfall.

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Hurricane staging is also comparable to the stages of cancer. The hurricane's size, how widespread it is, its strength, the wind speed: all these characteristics are similar to cancer staging.

Disasters often occur unannounced and impact a community at large. Similarly, cancer does not only affect one person but the entire family and community. The emergency can be a disaster or a mere incident.

There are disasters that impact a community and incidents that impact a company, its employees and its clients. You plan, prepare, train, respond and facilitate recovery in the event of an emergency.

Managing the full cycle is called emergency management.

Through my journey I met many people who said, "Don't utter that word, *cancer*." They thought that saying it was a negative action, that it is better to be positive and think there is nothing going on.

It is true that your mind controls your body and hence can affect a result. But I do not fear the word *cancer*.

It is just another word that defines the current medical condition afflicting my body. It does not, by any means, define me or limit the person I am. Only by accepting what is occurring within, prepares me for what can be next but cannot control it.

I still am the many roles I play in my personal and professional lives. They define me: mother, wife, daughter, volunteer, and a Disaster and Emergency Manager.

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*"Neha was a treasure.*

*Neha was a talented dramatist, a poet who was passionate about her heritage. She represented the community at events in Washington and elsewhere.*

*A very young writer lost her battle with cancer. Neha will be Sharada's companion moonbeam, shedding radiance as she did in life."*

**- Rakesh Kaul, author and dear friend**

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My Grandmother and My Best Friend

As I previously stated, sharing my disease with my family and friends was one of the best decisions I made.

But there was a decision that I did not make, and it one that I could not unmake: keeping my illness a secret from my grandmother, Bhabi.

Early on, it was decided by my family that it was best not to share my cancer diagnosis with her. At first I understood wanting to shield her from the devastating news, especially since my uncle, her son, had passed away a few months earlier after a long and brutal battle with cancer.

I wanted to protect her too. But as the months have rolled by, I am tormented by the deceit. As I am grappling with so many realities, the reality of life, death, loving and living, I know I want to live my most authentic self.

When one receives such life-changing news, what is important and what is not becomes evident pretty quickly.

"Being real" while coping with the "ultimate reality" suddenly matters so much. Yet with her, the

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lies roll off my lips and sink into her heart. What makes it more difficult is I know that she knows. She knows that I am not well in a way that is more real than what I lead her to believe.

She often enquires about me from my mother, and when I am well enough, I visit her. But with every visit, I see the pain in her eyes and understand it completely; for, it is a mirror reflection of the pain in my heart.

There is something so entirely agonizing about keeping secrets from those closest to you. How is it that a decision, born of love, has quickly grown to be so hated by me?

This is how I feel, as I carry this secret. I have realized that lies are so much like cancer: they rapidly multiply until they become you. I am no stranger to betrayal, as my body is quickly succumbing to this disease; I feel it in every cell, in every cancerous cell of my being, and yet, here I am perpetrating another betrayal.

I am allowing the cancer of lies to infect the trust we share and metastasize into the falsehood that has become our routine, and it bothers me – every single time.

My affection and fondness for my grandmother stems from my earliest memories. Bhabi took care of me in Kashmir during the time my mother was out working. She left a great impression on me. I always thought she was perfect. She was my first teacher of faith and religion. My very first memories are of us driving to *Vaishno Devi*, a religious site in India, and learning prayers and *bhajans (*hymns*)* along the way.

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She was my very first best friend when we still lived in India and later in the United States. I had a picture of her in my pencil box, and whenever I needed someone to talk to, there she was.

And yes, I talked, and she gave me answers in my dreams. And when she visited my first home in Orlando, we did everything together, from the morning prayer, to the chores, to going to the market; we were together.

She grounded me in so many rules, even in small things such as the importance of maintaining good dental hygiene, to never stepping out without spraying perfume, and to always looking presentable at every age.

I thought she had a very limited education, and she did by our standards today; she never studied, passed grade school, yet her wisdom went beyond what is found in books.

She only spoke Kashmiri and Hindi fluently, yet she communicated in English, just fine with the visitors from any background who came to her home.

I made it a point to only speak my broken Kashmiri with her; that is what I had done ever since I could remember. This limited our conversations to –

"How are you?" "How is your health"? "What did you eat?" "How are you feeling?" "Who have you talked to today?" but it did not matter.

Our experiences built a bond deeper than any words could ever express; it has taught me that language does not matter, love does.

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Our connection is profound and my love for her runs so deep. In the end, she will never know it is my end, until it actually is. I know this and it hurts. But I will always carry her with me, in this journey, and the next: a picture in a pencil box, my companion once again.

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Human Language

We encourage ourselves to learn more than one language but often forget to learn and choose the basic language of humanity.

This is the language of *please, excuse me, thank you, sorry*—the language of gratefulness, politeness and courtesy.

Who is supposed to teach us this—our parents, our teachers, our schools, or society?

In some cultures I have noticed that it is not discouraged to speak over another and to speak even louder as the only way to be heard, to ignore your place in the line and lean over and speak to someone who is at the cashier window, to push someone in a tight space or line in order to move forward, or to open a closed door without first knocking, and to do things like this without ever saying, "Sorry." All this is normal, and even the next person does not mind because it is the norm.

What are we teaching the next generation? Who is to break this norm?

It starts with the parent. Parenting is not just ensuring that the child gets everything and is well fed, properly rested, or entertained. It is not just about ensuring children's safety.

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It is equally important to teach them constantly the human language and correct them when they do not apply it. Having a daughter myself, I have noticed my child does not just try to copy me when I teach her a new action, but attentively watches and picks up my behaviour when I am not even teaching.

In other words, she is trying to learn and emulate my behaviour. This is how her first learning begins.

But many times, busy parents do not have as much time to spend with their children as they would like.

The educational institution is in place not only to teach math and science but basic etiquette, especially during the toddler stage, when the child is just learning to interact and use words.

Teachers are interacting with children for more than six hours sometimes on a daily basis. Children learn most things in school. And teachers are watching the children's interactions with other children, or adults, and that is when they should also enforce human language.

In school is where the next generation can learn the same human language, for a better tomorrow. And proper behaviour needs to be adapted in our society. It should be an essential part of our culture.

Society also plays a pivotal role in our upbringing, instructing us in what is accepted and what is not.

Human beings generally tend to listen to authority and follow it as long as it does not harm them.

This is true from our parents to the police and even to the sales attendant. We change our behaviour when we are home with our parents more than when we are with our friends. We are more disciplined and

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orderly because we do not want to hear our mothers scold us while we are visiting them for the holidays. So we behave.

When we notice that the driver in front of us slams on the brakes because a cop is nearby, then we react; we automatically want to ensure we are driving under the speed limit. But at the checkout, you ignore the sign and form two lines instead of one.

If no one stops you, you feel accomplished. Others follow, and this becomes a pattern. However, if an attendant informs you that there should only be one line, then you return to the back of the line in disappointment.

In our day-to-day lives, we interact with others on many levels, and we pick up acceptable behaviour. Our mind set plays a vital role.

As individual in one country will behave one way, and the same individual in another country will behave in another way. Why is that?

Is it because the individual wants to follow and obey society's behaviour code? The same person will litter openly in one country but find a trash can and dispose off trash properly in another country.

The point is that we can change our basic human behaviour and language. It is not easy to learn Mandarin in your thirties, but it is entirely possible to learn the human language of accepted human interaction.

We need to do this for our future and for our children. I want my child and all children, to grow up to value human beings and the environment they lives in, not by force or punishment but, rather, as a part of basic nature.

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The respect we give others with a simple "Thank you," "Please," or simple acknowledgment of another person's space reflects the respect we have earned for ourselves.

If we want others to respect us,we first have to display the same behaviour and actions towards others.

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*"I imagined you right there, smiling – that smile when you scrunch up your nose and pucker your lips a little (it's my favourite smile of yours, and I wish I had a picture of it). I imagined you kissing Aari to the point of annoying her. I imagined you telling me to not give her so many sweets and spoiling her. It was a perfect wish. It is incomprehensible that there are no words to describe what I wish for. All I have to say is this: I love you and I miss you."*

**- Parijat Tanna Talkad, friend and sister-in-law**

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The End?.... The End

Normally we know that death may come in the natural course, in old age or by other means. We know and we are aware of this.

But that is not the same as realizing it.

It is like someone who has never fallen in love. The person sees it all around, knows it, is aware of it, but has not felt it touching every pore of the body. Such a person has not felt the pain of a broken heart in every cell, from head to toe. This can only be felt when it is experienced firsthand.

Facing death is similar. We cannot realize it until we confront it face-to-face. It is like a criminal looking at you while pointing a gun at your head. But instead of pulling the trigger, the criminal just keeps you captive. You plead, asking, "When do you plan to pull the trigger?" Or you ask to just be set free.

The criminal gives no answer, and instead leaves you tied down and unaware of your fate.

This feeling is similar for people with cancer, at least with stage-four cancer. They face such a challenge every day. They may not be tied down in a literal sense; they may have the freedom to roam around, to see their loved ones, and to do everything a free individual can.

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But, ultimately, they are tied down to the battle with no awareness of how much or how little they can do, how far they can go, or how long they have.

Those thoughts constantly create turmoil in their minds, but no one can give them answers.

If I were 60 or older I, would have accomplished much in my career and had grown up kids and maybe even grandkids. I would be doing things I like or did not get to do earlier, while I was building my career. I would be enjoying the fruits of my labour.

But now...I am just beginning, just planting my seeds, and death has already knocked on my door.

Yesterday I had a CT scan. I got a call today from the doctor's office. I must go see the doctor right away to discuss this report. And I must schedule an ultrasound on my liver, for a potential blood clot.

My heart is pounding. I am scared. Is it bad news that he wants to see us to discuss this report right away, rather than at the scheduled visit in a few days? Am I getting worse? Am I not responding to treatment, and are more bad things happening?

Do not I already have so many troubling symptoms? Nausea, vomiting, joint pain, nerve pain, pressure pain (all these together), inability to urinate, dry mouth, aggressive phlegm coughing, constant fever, drowsiness, heavy diarrhea and constipation: These symptoms occur simultaneously, every day, for weeks and months. Is this suffering not enough?

Maybe, as you read this, it does not sound like much, but you should know that I have all these ten-plus symptoms happening all at once, and then get back to me.

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What is going on?

So the diagnosis is the progression of the disease. I have months now, even with the new chemo. There is no option of treatment available to me now.

Ticktock...death is knocking at the door. Am I dying? Or am I going to be a miracle story, wherein everything suddenly disappears? Or will I suffer with one symptom or another and yet continue to live?

I welcome death with open arms. It is just as much a part of living as breathing is. You cannot accomplish one without accepting the existence of the other.

Do not fear it. It is frightening, but liberating.

It is the journey up to the point of death that can be challenging, But it is not the last, the final act. I am not scared of dying. I am scared of losing my dear child. It is not my end. It's not the end.

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*"Your Aariyana asks for and enquires whether anybody has your number to call you? If you can visit us and play with her again.*
*I lost my mother, father, brother, sister, my best friends and I moved on. But losing one's own child is like losing your own existence. I remember you telling your brother - "Shibu, Mai abhi marna nahi chahti" - Shibu, I don't want to die yet. Your words keep haunting me. How can one get over that?"*

**- Deepak Ganju, father**

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PART III

POEMS

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There Comes A Turn No Not In A Book

There comes a turn no not in a book,
In my life

There comes a break when I feel like,
I am losing my dreams

There comes a time when I feel like,
I am losing my life

There comes a thought when I feel like,
Are we acting a play

There comes a pause when you feel like?
what I did wrong

No noo noo
Am I or am I not
Am I losing my life
No noo noo
Am I losing my mind
No noo noo
Is it a way of life
??????????

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Neha We Hardly Knew You – A Tribute

When you were a bubbling cherubic baby,
The joy you aroused trumped the future possibilities.
You grew in a modest footprint;
Little did we know you would one day
light a torch.
When you became a maiden,
You met your goals via graceful excellence;
Things looked fruitful on the horizon;
Future beckoned.
Your wedding with Kartikeya
Was a rainbow of celebrations;
Joy intoxicated our dreams;
Love crackled in the air.
Your life swooned through its potentialities;
Aariyana arrived soon to fill the boat;
The trajectory of your life moved over wave crests,
Destination unknown.
But God had different plans;
He wanted you to be close to Him,
So He called you earlier than usual.
You now have higher goals than on Earth.
You leave behind many smiles,
Many encouraged hearts,
Many love-filled memories.

- Maharaj Kaul, Poet and Thinker

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Do not take These away from Me

I have a lot to explore.
I have a lot to do.
I have a lot to achieve.
I have a lot to believe.
I have a lot to share.
I have a lot to learn.
Just some of the things I want to do—
Please don't take these away from me.
I want to enjoy.
I want to indulge.
I want to dance.
I want to play sitar.
I want to travel distances.
I want to bake.
Just some of the things I want to do—
Please don't take these away from me.
I want to see her grow.
I want to see her fly.
I want to spoil her.
I want to scold her.
I want to wipe her tears.
I want to see her take over the world.
Just some of the things I want to do—
Please don't take these away from me.
I have a lot of me to give.
I have a lot of you to see.
It's just some of the simple things—
Please don't take these away from me.
Please don't take these away from me.
Please don't take these away from me.

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The Treatment Journey

Ticktock, round it goes.
Drop; vertically it flows.
Up, down, up, down.
Waiting labs, waiting in the chair.
Cold sandwiches, hot coffee.
Cold rooms, hot blankets.
Ticktock, round it goes.
Drop; vertically it flows.
Check in, check out.
Nurse in, nurse out.
Just another day for them,
But a dreadful one for us.
Ticktock, round it goes.
Drop; vertically it flows.
Smiles and frowns.
No kids allowed.
A place with all sorts of faces.
But mostly those with depressed gazes.
Ticktock, round it goes.
Drop; vertically it flows.

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Pursuit of Power

Education gives you knowledge.
Power gives you status in society.
Power is what drives everything.
Two things give you power: money and fame.
Money gives you power to do things;
Fame gives you power to be heard.
If you want a change, you need,
At least one of these words.
With money you can acquire,
With fame you can sway.
Both are ideal, but not all can achieve.
Aim for at least one of these words.
But two things can ruin your plan:
Health and Hunger.

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I am a Minority

Not because I am a woman, but because I am an Asian,
I am a minority.
Not because I am an Asian, but because I'm a woman engineer,
I am a minority.
Not because I am an engineer, but because I'm a working mother,
I am a minority.
Not because I am a working mother, but because I don't smoke or drink,
Yet I have kidney cancer at 33,
I am a minority.
Not because I have kidney cancer, but because I have
A sub-type that affects only 2 to 5 percent in the world,
I am a minority.
Is that my fault?
Then why is there not enough funding to find
A cure for a minority?

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My Mumma

I may still be so tiny and small.

Not understanding why and where you are gone.

When I see a star or a plane up in the sky,

I tell everyone that it is my Neha Mumma up above the world so high.

I am so tiny and small

Asking everyone why I cannot give you a call

As I want just to play with you for a while.

No one can answer me why.

May be because

I am so tiny and small.

I tell everyone that you are around.

Invisible like a fragrance as I keep meeting you in my dreams.

And see you kissing my cheeks,

May be because

I am so tiny and small.

I will be grown up one day.

But my longing will never fade away.

I miss you, I want you, I love you every moment, every day,

my Mumma.

- Deepak Ganju on behalf of Aariyana

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आरियाना के लिए

तुझ में मेरी साँस बसी है
तुझ में मेरी साँस रुकी है
तू जो हँसें मैं हँसू
तू जो रोए मैं रोऊँ
तेरा दुख, मेरा दुख
तेरा सुख, मेरा सुख
मैं रहूँ ना रहूँ
मेरी साँस तुझ में रुकी है

Aariyana ke liye

Tujh mein meri saans basi hai
Tujh mein meri saans ruki hai
Tu jo hanse main hansu
Tu jo roye main roun
Tera dukh mera dukh
Tera sukh mera sukh
Main rahu na rahu
Meri saans tujh mein ruki hai

For You, Aariyana

You are my life breath
My breath is in your breath
I smile when you smile
I weep when you weep
Your sorrow is my sorrow
Your happiness is my happiness
Whether I stay or not
My breath is in your breath

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जीने दो हमें

खुले तालाब में डूब मरने का जी करता है
खुले आसमान में चीख़ने का जी करता है
खुली वादियों में उड़ने का जी करता है
खुले बादलों में सो जाने का जी करता है
खुली बारिश में रोने का जी करता है
रोज़ाना की तड़प से छुटकारा पाने का जी करता है
तकलीफों की बंदिश से भागने का जी करता है
शरीर की हथकड़ियों से छुटकारा पाने का जी करता है
जीने का जी करता है
मरने का जी करता है
कुछ कर दिखाने का जी करता है
खुलके जीने दो हमें!
जीने का मन करता है
जीने दो हमें!
जीने दो हमें!

Jeene do humein

Khule talab mein doob marne ka jee karta hai.
Khule aasman mein cheekhne ka jee karta hai.
Khuli vaadiyon mein udne ka jee karta hai.
Khule baadalon mein so jaane ka jee karta hai.
Khuli baarish mein rone ka jee karta hai.
Rozane ke tadap se chhutkara panay ka jee karta hai.
Takleefon ke bandish se bhaagne ka jee karta hai.
Shareer ki hathkadiyo se chhutkara pane ka jee karta hai.
Jeene ka jee karta hai.
Marne ka jee karta hai.
Kuch kar dikhane ka jee karta hai.
Khul ke jeene do humein.
Jeene ka man karta hai.
Jeene do humein.
Jeene do humein.

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Let me live

I want to drown in a vast pond

I want to scream under an open sky

I want to fly in the vast expanse

I want to sleep in the boundless clouds

I want to weep in the heavy rains

I want release from the daily agony

I want to flee from the bondages of suffering

I want to be free of this bodily restraint

I desire to live

I desire to die

I desire to prove myself

Let me live freely. I desire to live

Let me live

Let me live

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हम वो सवाल हैं जिसका कोई जवाब नहीं

करती हूँ तुझ से दुआ
लेले जो है अंदर बद्दुआ
जीना है कुछ देर यहाँ
छीन न ले मुझ को यहाँ
महसूस करना है कुछ लम्हों को यहाँ
छोटा सा है परिवार यहाँ
हस्ते हैं हम वहाँ और रोते हैं यहाँ
जितना हँसते हैं उससे थोड़ा कम रोते हैं
बदलती है दुनिया और बदलता समाज है
जितनी बदलती है दुनिया, उससे कम बदले समाज है
करते हैं सवाल और मिलते जवाब है
जितना करते हैं सवाल, उससे कम मिलते जवाब हैं
नफरत का फसाना और मोहोब्बत की जंग है
दोनो की शुरुवात होती है जब हो नफरत का रंग

Hum voh Sawal hain jiska koi Jawab nahi

Karti hun tujh se dua.
Lele jo hai andar baddua.
Jeena hai kuchh der yahan.
Chheen na le mujh ko yahan.
Mehsoos karna hai kuchh lamhon ko yahan.
Chhota sa hai parivar yahan.
Haste hain hum wahan aur rote hain yahan.
Jitna haste hain usse thoda kam rote hain.
Badalti hai duniya aur badalti samaj hai.
Jitni badalti hai duniya usse kam badlei samaj hai.
Karte hain sawal aur milte jawab hain.
Jitna karte hain sawal usse kam milte jawab hain.
Nafrat ka phasana aur mohabbat ki jung hai.
Dono ki shuruwat hoti hai jab ho nafrat ka rang

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I am the Question which has no Answer

I pray to You to free me from this curse within
I want to live here for some time; please don't snatch me from here
I want to experience some more moments here
I am incased by my small family here
We laugh there, and we weep here
But we always weep less than we laugh
The world changes and society changes
But society changes less than the world changes
We ask questions and receive answers
But the fewer answers do we receive
as many questions as we ask,
Whether trapped in the hatred or at war in love -
Both begin when there is the color of hatred.

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एक चिठ्ठी

एक भेजी थी चिठ्ठी जिसका हमें था इंतज़ार
हाल था पूछाना और कुछ सवालों का जवाब

दिन महीने बीते और कुछ साल
न आई वह चिठ्ठी, न आया कोई जवाब
खैरियत है सब, करने लगे हम सवाल

जिस मिठ्ठी मे थे खेले
जिस बगीचे में किया प्यार
सोचा न था कभी, यह होगा उसका हाल

घर घर खेला करते थे
हम और हमारे यार
आज याद आ रही है उस घर की बार बार

जिस घर में रखा था कदम पहला
जिन सड़को पे किया था
कई बार मेटाडोर का इंतज़ार

जिन दुकानों से लाये थे
वो गरम गरम कांदर चोट्ट
न सोचा था कभी, यह होगा उसका हाल

वो बागीचे, वो सड़कें, वो अपना घर
आज जल रहा है, राख हो रहा है
हर एक वो याद

जगह जगह ढूंढा
लिखया एक एफ आई आर
फिर भी नहीं मिले वह सालों बाद

जाने क्यों चीखने की आवाज़ आई
सपनों में बार बार
एक भेजी थी चिठ्ठी जिसका हमें था इंतजार
न आई वो चिठ्ठी, न आया कोई जवाब

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Ek Chitthi

Ek bheji thi chitthi jis ka hume tha intezar.
Haal tha puchna aur, Kuchh sawaalo ka jawab.
Din, maheeney beeti, aur kuchh saal,
Na aayi koi chitthi, na aaya koi jawab.
Khairiyat hai sab, karne lage hum sawal.
Jis mitti mein thhe khele,
jis bagiche mein kiya pyaar,
socnchha na tha kabhi, yeh hoga uska haal.
Ghar ghar khela karte thhe,
hum aur humare yaar.
Aaj yaad aa rahi hai, us ghar ki baar baar.
Jis ghar mein rakha tha,
kadam pehli baar,
Jin sadko pe kiya tha
kai baar Matador ka intezar,
Jin dukano se laye tha,
woh garam garam kandiri chot
Na souncha tha kabhi, yeh hoga uska haal.
Woh bagiche, woh sadke, woh apna ghar
Aaj jal raha hai, raakh ho raha hai,
har ek woh yaad.
Jaghay jaghay dhoonda,
likha ek FIR.
Phir bhi nahi mile woh saalo baad.
Jaane kyon cheekhne ki aawaz aaee sapno mein baar baar.
Ek bheji thhi chitthi, jis ka hume thha intezar.
Na aayi woh chitthi, na aaya koi jawab.

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A Letter

Once I sent a letter, and I was waiting for the reply.
I wanted to know your welfare and
needed answers to some inquiries.
Days, months and years have gone by,
Neither a letter, nor any answers came.
I began to question about your well-being.
Soil where I played, and the garden where I loved.
Never thought that this would be its state;
Remembering playing family and home with my playmates;
Today, I am recalling that home again and again.
That house into which I stepped in the first time;
Those roads where I often waited for the Matador;
Those bakery shops from where we brought hot flat morning bread,
Never thought that all will be taken away in one breath;
Every memory, of those gardens, roads, one's home,
is burning into ashes today.
Searched everywhere, wrote an FIR (police report);
Still not received it, after so many years;
Who knows why I hear screaming voices repeatedly in dreams?
A letter was sent that I waited,
Neither that letter, nor any answer came.

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हमे न जाने क्यों चुना है

हमें न जाने क्यों चुना है?
कभी किसी का बुरा न चाहा है
दर शर्मिंदा कभी न हुआ है
शरीर और मन दोनों उलझे हैं
इंसान सह न पाये, इतना क्यों देता है
शराफत से न यह दर्द पेश आता है

हमें न जाने क्यों चुना है?
कभी किसी का बुरा न चाहा है
ज़िन्दगी का रुख इतना बदला है
बचाने निकले हैं औरों को
पर जान तो अपनी ही खतरे में है
अब लड़ते हम समय से हैं
कभी उम्मीद टूट न जाये कहीं
इस एक डोर को पकडे बैठे हैं

हमें न जाने क्यों चुना है?
कभी किसी का बुरा न चाहा है
चक्कर काटने का कोई शौक़ नहीं है
पर अब इस मुश्किल से निकलना खेल नहीं
जिन्दा तो हूँ, सांस तो चलती है
क्या इसीको जीना कहते है?
हमें न जाने क्यों चुना है?
कभी किसी का बुरा न चाहा है

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Humey na jaane kyon chunna hai

Humey na jaane kyon chunna hai.
Kabhi kisi ka bura na chaha hai.
Dar sharminda kabhi na hua hai.
Shareer aur mann dono uljhe hain.
Insaan seh na paya, itna kyon deta hai.
Sharafat se na yeh dard pesh ata hai.

Humey na jaane kyon chunna hai.
Kabhi kisi ka bura na chaha hai.
Zindagi ka rukh itna badla hai,
Bachaane nikale he auro ko,
Par jaan to apni hi khatre mein hai.
Ab ladte hum samay se hain.
Kabhi umeed toot na jayae kaheen -
Iss ek dor ko pakde baithe hain.

Humey na jaane kyon chunna hai.
Kabhi kisi ka bura na chaha hai.
Chakar katne ka koi shauk nahi hai.
Par ab iss mushkil se nikalna khel nahi.
Zinda to hu, saans to chalti hai.
Kya isi ko jeena kehte hai?
Humey na jaane kyon chunna hai.
Kabhi kisi ka bura na chaha hai.

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Chosen

I don't know why I was chosen?
I never hurt anybody, nor wished ill of anyone
Nor acted otherwise to shame anyone
Both my body and mind are entangled
Why does HE give so much? If a person can't endure
This agony never comes straightforward
I don't know why I was chosen
I never wished ill of anyone
The trajectory of my life has changed so much
I set out to save others, but
It is my own life that is now in danger
Now I am fighting against time
I cling to this thread of hope lest it break
I don't know why I was chosen
I never wished anyone ill
I don't desire to reincarnate
But it's not easy to liberate
I still breathe, I'm still alive
But is this called living?
I don't know why I was chosen
I never wished anyone ill

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एक फूल

एक था फूल, बहुत सुन्दर फूल
मधुमखी शहद बना न सकी
शादियों के सेज पे सज न सकी
भगवान के शिखर पे चढ़ न सकी
तो क्या ज़रूरत थी उस फूल की
जो किसी के काम आ न सकी
जो वक्त से पहले खुद मुरझा जाये
वो वैसा एक फूल है

Ek Phool

Ek tha phool, bahut sunder hi phool
Madhumakhi shehed bana na saki.
Shaadiyo ke sej pe saj na saki.
Bhagwan ki shikhar pe chad na saki.
To kya zarurat thi us phool ki
Jo kisi ke kaam aa na saki
Jo waqt se pehlay khud murjha jaye,
Vo vaisa ek phool hai.

A Flower

There was a flower and it was beautiful
But...
A bee could not make honey
It was not able to adorn a wedding bed
Nor was it offered to God
So what was the need of this flower
that was not of use to anyone?
A flower that withers before its time
It is such a flower.

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मजबूरी

नकाब तो ओड़ा
छोड़ा ना गया
सपने सजाये
तोड़े ना गए
रास्ते तो बनाये
जोड़े ना गए
घर तो बनाया
बसाया ना गया

Majburi

Nakab to odaa,
Chhoda na gaya.
Sapne sajaye,
Tode na gaye.
Raste to banaye,
Joday na gaye.
Ghar to banaya,
Basaaya na gaya.

Helplessness

I donned a veil,
And was unable to let it go;
I arranged my dreams,
And did not let them break.
I built my paths
But they could not be linked.
I built a house that was not a home.

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एक जुनून था

कुछ करने का कुछ बदलन का
जुनून ही जुनून, है एक जुनून।
एक जुनून कुछ करने का कुछ बदलने का
हाँ, है जुनून ना करो इसे चूर
परिवर्तन का जुनून जारी रखो
जुनून अच्छा है, ख्वाब अच्छे हैं
हिम्मत ना हारो, बरक़रार रखो इसे ज़रूर
लक्ष्य हो पास या हो दूर, पर करेंगे इसे पूरा
जुनून ही जुनून, है एक जुनून
कुछ करने का, कुछ बदलने का
हाँ, है जुनून, न करो इसे चूर
बाज़ी अभी न हारी, दश्मन से जो यारी निभाई
मरना तो एक बहाना है, हर किसीको तो जाना है
जिन्दगी है तो, जी कर कुछ कर दिखाना है

Ek Junoon thha

Kuchh karne ka kuchh badalne ka
Junoon hi junoon, hai ek junoon.
Kuchh karne ka kuchh badalne ka
Haan hai junoon, na karo isse choor.
Parivartan ka junoon zaari rakho
Junoon achha hai, khwab achhe hain.
Himmat na haro, barkarar rakho isey zaroor
Laksh ho paas ya ho door, par karenge isey poora.
Junoon hi junoon, hai ek junoon.
Kuchh karne ka, kuchh badalne ka
Haan hai junoon, na karo ise choor.
Baazi abhi na haari; dushman se jo yaari nibhahi.
Marna to ek bahana hai, har kisi ko to jana hai.
Zindagi hai to, jee kar kuchh kar dikhana hai.

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Passion

To do something, to change something
That is the passion.
To do something, to change something,
Yes, it is a passion; do not shatter it.
Nurture the passion for change.
Passion is good, dreams are good.
Do not give up, keep at it.
Goal be near or far, but we will achieve it.
Passion, only passion
To do something, to change something.
Yes, there is passion; Do not crush it.
I befriended the enemy; I did not lose the game yet
Dying is an excuse. Everyone will depart.
While there is life, accomplish something and live it.

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दो बूंद

दो बूंद...दो बूँद
एक बूँद कहे मैं हूँ पानी
एक बूँद कहे मैं हूँ बूँद
कौन कहे कौन सही या गलत
एक बूँद बूँद करके बनता है समुन्दर
एक बूँद सिमटे तो होता है पानी
एक बूँद
एक बूँद

Do Boond

Do boond.
Do boond.
Ek boond kahe main hun pani.
Ek boond kahe main hun boond.
Kaun kahe kaun sahi ya galat.
Ek boond boond kare banta hai samundar.
Ek boond simte to hota hai pani.
Ek boond.
Ek boond.

Two Drops

Two drops,
Two drops.
A drop says----"I am water."
The other says—"I am only a drop."
Who will decide which is right and
which is wrong.
Drop by drop makes an ocean.
One drop thaw into water.
One drop.
One drop.

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हर एक पल

हर एक एहसास
हर बात पे जुड़ी है उम्मीद
हर एक पल में है तन्हाई
हर एक पल मे है उम्मीद
दोनों एक दुसरे की परछाई
तन्हाई तो खुद को खुद मे ढूँढे
उम्मीद तो अपने में सिमटे
दोनों ढूँढे एक दूसरे में
दोनों खुद को ढूँढे और खोजे

Har Ek Pal

Har ek ehsaas
har baat pe judi hai ummeed.
Har ek pal mein hai tanhaie.
Har ek pal mein hai ummeed.
Dono ek dusre ki parchaye.
Tanhaie to khud ko khud mein dhunde.
Ummeed to apne mein simtay
Dono dhoonde ek doosare mein.
Dono khud ko dhoonde aur khoje.

Every Moment

Every feeling
Everything is linked to hope
In every moment, there is loneliness
In every moment, there is hope
Both are each other's shadow
Loneliness finds itself within itself
Hope is within itself
Both search in each other
Both seek themselves.

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एक थी छोटी सी फैमिली

एक थी छोटी सी फैमिली
एक है छोटी सी कहानी
यह है तीनो की कहनी
सपने देखे थे उन्होंने
कई ख्वाइशे थी मन में
एक अपनी दुनिया बनाएंगे
खुशिओं से भरा रहेगा वो छोटा सा महल
कहेंगे उसको अपना घर
ऊपर वाले ने मदद न की तो क्या हुआ?
पूरा कर लेंगे वह तीन
यह थी सोंच, यही था सहारा
यह थे वह तीन
ज़िन्देगी से माँगा नहीं
किसी से छीना नही
अपनी कोशिश करते रेहे,
खुद को बनाते रहे
ऊपर वाले ने मदद न की तो क्या हुआ?
पूरा कर लेंगे वह तीन
मुश्किलें आये, सैलाब आये
खडे रहे वह तीन
चलते रहे, रास्ते बदलते रहे
खुशी, खुशी निभाते रहे
ऊपर वाले ने मदद न की तो क्या हुआ?
पूरा कर लेंगे वह तीन
यह थी सोंच, यही था सहारा
यह थे वह तीन
एक है छोटी सी कहानी
एक थी छोटी सी फैमिली
यह है तीनो की कहानी

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Ek thhi Chhoti si Family

Ek thi chhoti si family.
Ek hai chhoti si kahani.
Yeh hai teeno ki kahani.
Sapne dekhe thhe unhone,
Kai khwaisheh thhi man mein.
Ek apni duniya banayege.
Khushio se bhara rahega woh chhota se mahal.
Kehenge us ko apna ghar.
Upar wala ne madat na ki to kya hua?
Pura kar lenge woh teen.
Yeh thhi sonch, yahi thha sahara.
Yeh thhe woh teen.
Zindagi se manga nahi,
Kisi ka chheena nahi.
Apni koshish karte rahe,
khud ko banate rahe.
Upar wala ne madat na ki to kya hua?
Pura kar lenge woh teen.
Mushkile aaye, sahlab aaya -
Khade rahe woh teen.
Chalte rahe, raaste baadalte rahe.
Khushi khushi nibhaate rahe.
Upar wala ne madat na ki to kya hua?
Pura kar lenge woh teen.
Yeh thhi sonch, yehi thha sahara.
Yeh thhe woh teen.
Ek hai chhoti si kahani.
Ek thhi chhoti si family.
Yeh hai teeno ki kahani.

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There was a Small Family

It was a small family
It is a small story
Verily, it is the story of these three
They had dreams
They had desires
They wanted to make their own world
That small palace will be full of happiness,
And will call it their home!
So what if God wouldn't help?
Together, those three, would accomplish it
This was their thinking, and their support
These were the three
They did not demand from life
Snatched nothing from anyone
They simply kept on trying
They kept on striving
So what if God wouldn't help?
Those three will accomplish it
There was a small family of three
Difficulties came and so did waves of misfortune
The family of three stayed steadfast
They kept moving, changing paths
They happily played their role
So what if God wouldn't help?
But these three will accomplish it,
This was their thinking, this was the support.
These were the three
There was a small story
There was a small family
This is the story of those three.

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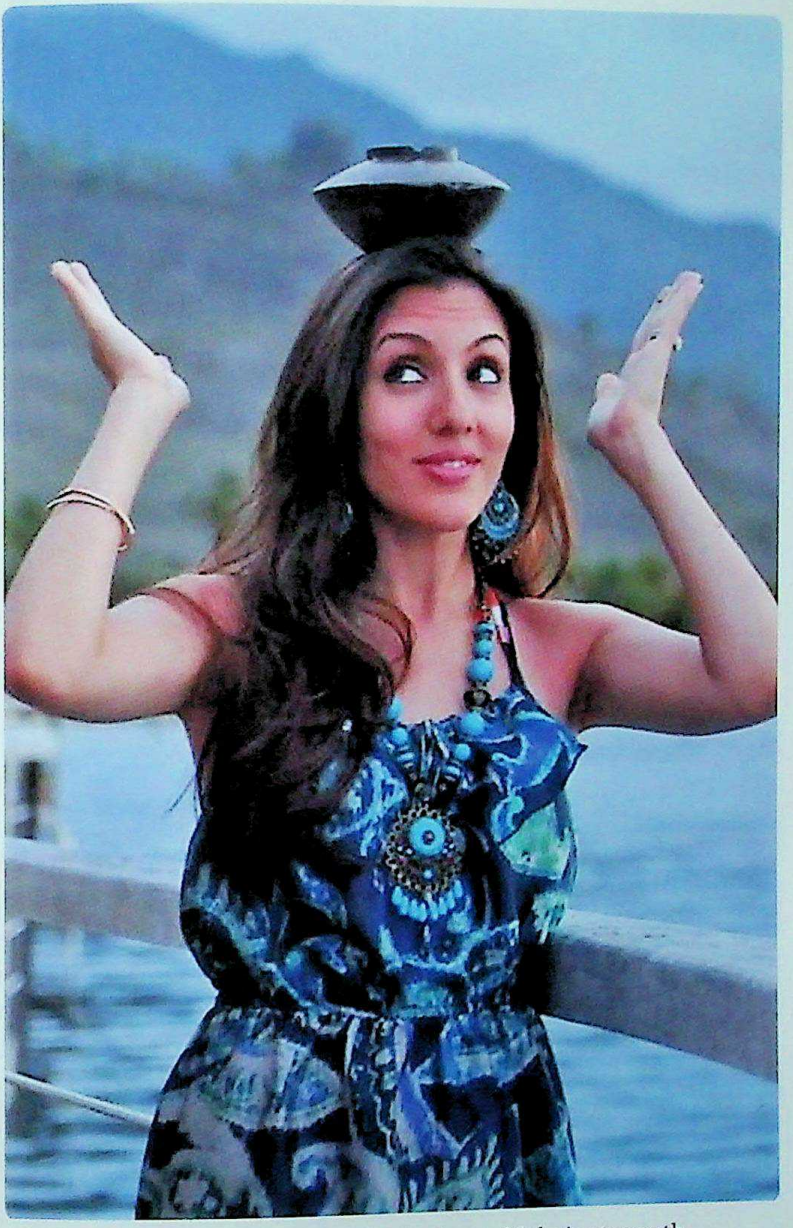
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Why did you have to leave me stranded here?
Why did your life, your each breath have to cease?
Your memories make me feel you're still near,
calming my heart day by day to its ease.
Sometimes these memories make me weep,
for the days long before you went away.
Sometimes I think about you in my sleep,
I prayed, I begged, I asked for you to stay,
Yet I must let go of this memory,
for we all know nothing lasts forever.
And time a savior, told me, Let it be.
I saw end, but my heart told me never.
Seal my pain in your heart, and shut time out.
See darkness and understand my doubt.

- Nihar Ganju, brother

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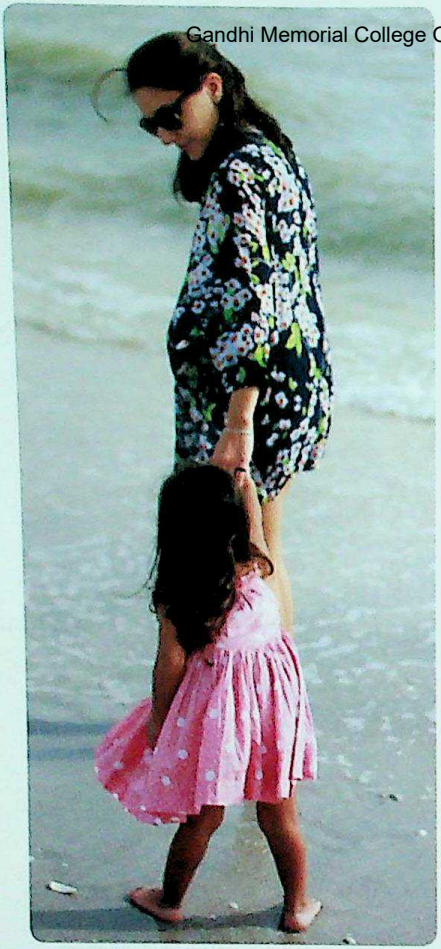
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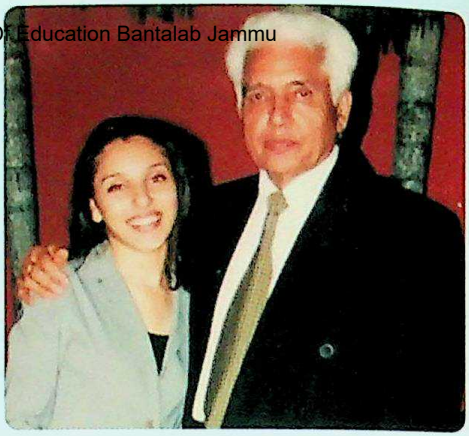
A calm and balanced mind was Neha's strength

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I have made many mistakes but I have done one right thing-You



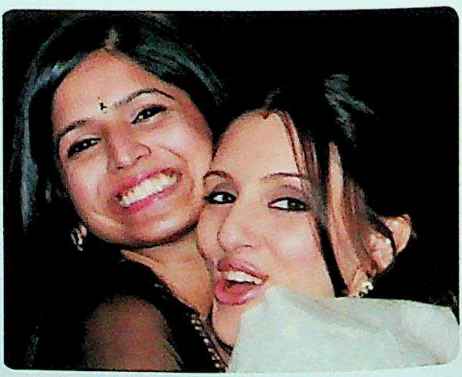
Neha Blessed by Grandfather Papa ji



Neha with her loving and caring mother- in- law Divya Tanna - 2013



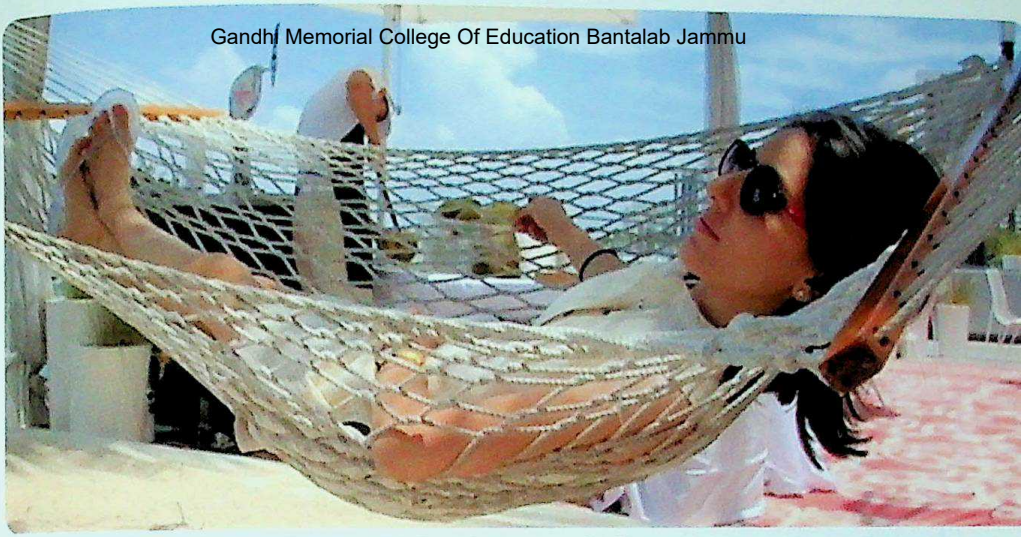
Neha welcoming North Miami Mayor at Kashmir Hindu Heritage Day



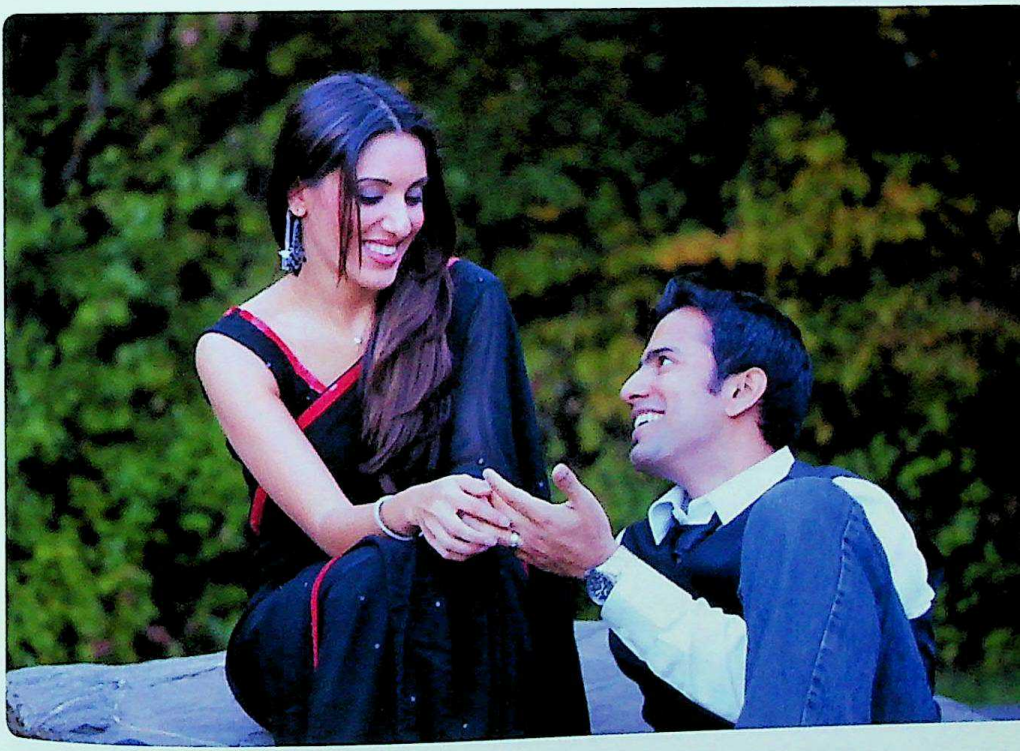
Throughout suffering process Neha showed importance of friendship and family

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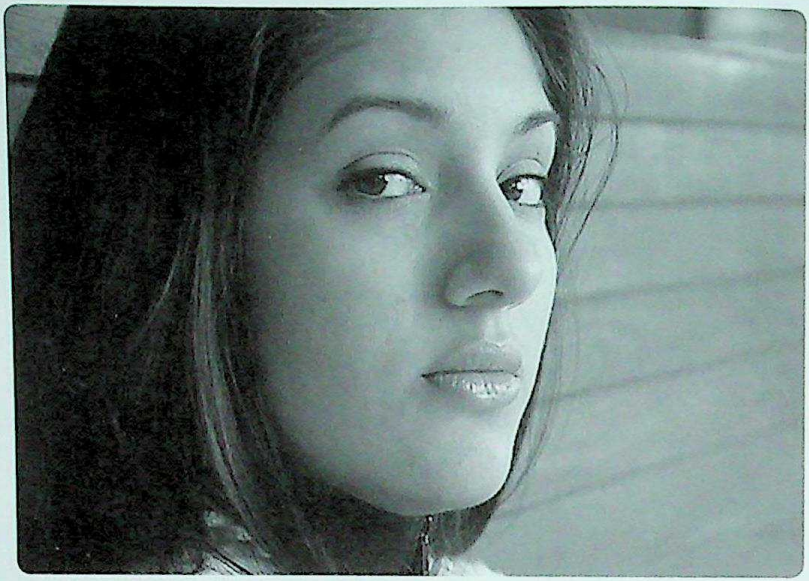


Neha- A Beauty So Rare



Neha always believed in creating memories through frames

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Questioning existence of life



At Sylvester Hospital relaxed even after being informed about her fatal medical condition. May, 2016



At Sylvester Hospital, smiling even after knowing very little time is left. August, 2016

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Neha managed her disease till end



Happy and hopeful after comimg home from hospital

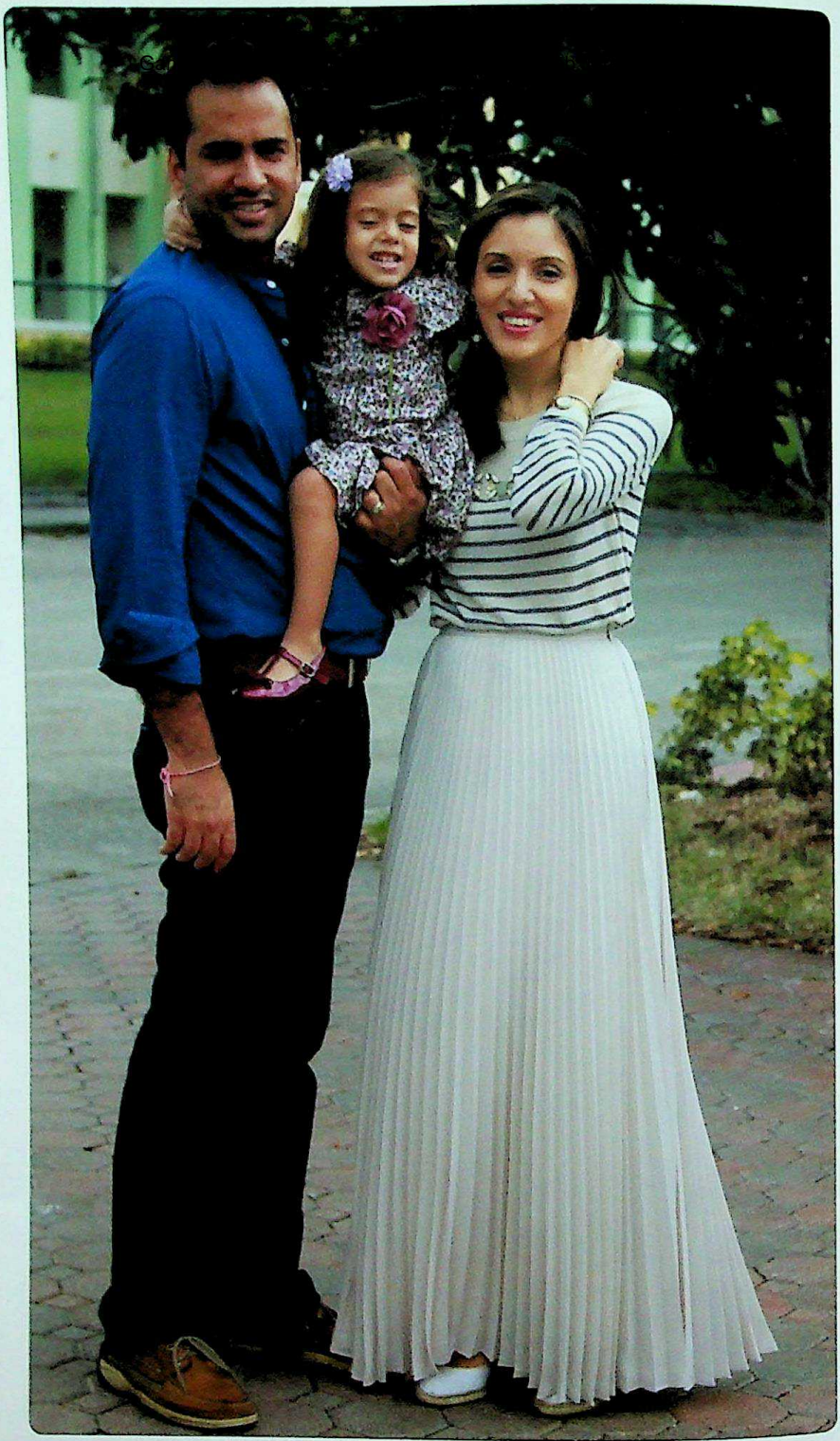


Neha with the Doctors and Nurses, at University of Miami Hospital. Selfies taken by Neha



Painting a day before final good bye

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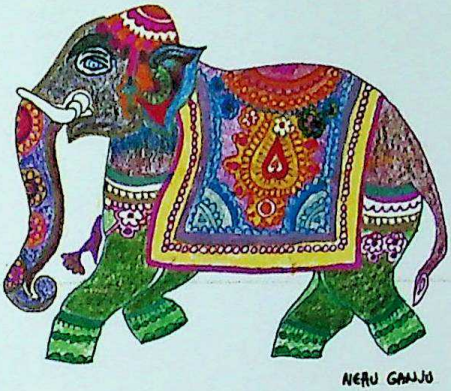
All smiles - Kartikeya, Neha and Aariyana

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Neha's Artwork

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Studies in color -an interpretation of life from the Neha's view as an artist



Mandala optics -our life is like a mandala – a vast, limitless circle



Drawing with texture

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Neha believed that colours helps you to listen to yourself, and your own needs

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PART IV

BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

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BRIEF CHRONOLOGY OF THE AUTHOR

Born in New Delhi, India, 5 January 1982

Family moved to Kashmir, India, October 1982

Family left Kashmir and moved back to Delhi in December 1989

Family left India and relocated to Florida, United States in May 1993

Married in October 2010

Moved to India in December 2012

Blessed with motherhood in 2013

Moved back to the United States in December 2014

Education

Tiny Tots School, Kashmir, India,1985-87

Presentation Convent High School, Kashmir, India, 1987-89

Kendriya Vidyalaya School, Green Fields School in New Delhi, India, 1990

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Horace Mann Middle School, Highland Oaks Middle School, Miami, Florida, United States, 1993-97

North Miami Senior High School, Miami, Florida, United States, 1997-2000

Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering, University of Florida, 2000- 2005

Master of Science in Systems and Engineering Management (focus: crisis, emergency, and risk management), George Washington University, School of Engineering and Applied Science, 2009

Work Experience

Emergency Programs Manager, G4S Corporation, Fannie Mae, Washington, DC, USA, January 2015–October 2016

Manager, Safety Center, Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar (IITGn),Gujarat, India, March 2013–August 2013

Emergency Programs Manager, Fannie Mae, Washington, DC, USA, March 2012–December 2012

Manager, Incident Management Center, G4S Corporation, Fannie Mae, Washington, DC, USA, December 2009–March 2012

Team Leader, Pfizer Pharmaceuticals, Terre Haute, IN, February 2007–July 2008

Operations Resource, Regional Representative for PepsiCo Asia Network, Frito-Lay Inc., Orlando, FL, June 2005–January 2007.

Awarded "Erase the Waste" for reducing cost while increasing production.

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Leadership Skills

Senate, GW Student Association (2009–2010)

Youth Vice-President of International Affairs, Indo-American Community Federation (2007–2009)

Chair, Engineering Ambassador (2004–2005)

Founder/President, South Asian Student Alliance (2004–2005)

Vice-President of External Affairs, Society of Women Engineering (2004–2005)

Past positions include Director of "An Evening w/ Industry," Mentoring Director, and Co-Chair of High-School Outreach Volunteered, Center for Children and Women in Crisis Senior Advisor and Political Affairs Chair, Asian-Pacific Student Council (2004–2005)

Earned the prestigious Miami Herald Silver Knight Award for her Community service.

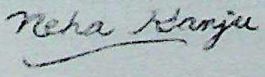
Social Work

St Catherine's Home, Mumbai, India; after-school tutoring, teaching dance, and general counselling for girls aged one to 14, June 2008– August 2008

ADAPT (formerly known as the Spastics Society of India), Mumbai,

India - teaching students, aged seven to 11 as well as primary school kids in the Dharavi slum area, June 2008–August 2008.

Signature



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Epilogue

When I hired Neha in 2009, little did I know that I am hiring the best employee that I have ever had to date. Neha's unwavering positivity and "can do" attitude made her seemingly invincible.

She was my super hero who could solve any problem, streaming any process and get an employee to self-actualize to maximize production.

In fact she was so good that others (mostly men in senior positions) would get frustrated and come to me complaining about her being too hard on an employee, etc.

As her manager, I would internally smile and let her go on her way as she was right. One of my fondest memories of Neha at work is when G4S management decided to add Neha to the protest team. Boy, did that backfire on them! She has to be at work at 5.30 am and go through the protest response protocol and set up the barriers. Not only did she run circles around the security officers and was the quickest to set up the barrier, she also informed G4S senior management how to streamline the process to make it more efficient.

She did all of this with smile on her face and left me in awe of her innate ability to simplify process and

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inform others about how to make the process more efficient.

When Neha informed me that she was leaving to take up a position in India, I know that she was nervous telling me. However, internally I was smiling and giddy as I was gaining a friend.

To me Neha was one of the coolest people I have ever met. She taught me all about the Hindu religion and customs. I also learned about the experiences that shaped who she was. She literally was the kindest, most positive person I have ever known. Nothing was too big to overcome.

When Neha told me her diagnosis, I knew the reality of the situation as one of my cousin's husband was also diagnosed with stage 4 kidney cancer. Never once did she waiver. In fact, she treated it as just another hurdle to overcome.

She almost had me believing that she would beat this even though I knew the reality of the situation.

Since her diagnosis, she wavered a few times, told me how much pain she was in after major setbacks. However, that negativity literally only lasted a second as she would quickly follow up with a plan on how she was going to get stronger to resume treatments, or she was looking for jobs in the Miami Dade area.

Neha was and will continue to be my pulse when things were going not well in my life as her motto always was, if there is will, there is a way.

"Things may not look good now, but you have the power to change that by looking at the positive and working towards change."

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These are words that I will never forget and will continue to live by. Neha was and will continue to be my role model as to how I live my life.

Neha was one of the most impactful people I have ever met. She was a wonderful person, and as we all know, she did not depart us willingly. Not a week goes by when I don't think of her. May her memory live on through Aari, and upholding what was important to Neha, and sharing memories with others.

Sarah Brooks Smith
Director of Resiliency at Fannie Mae

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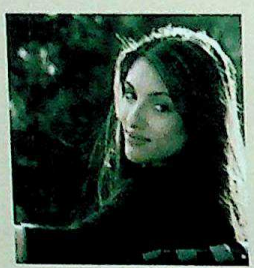
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One moment, Neha Ganju Tanna was a happy new mother to a beautiful baby girl. The next, she was a terminal cancer patient.

Neha refused to let her diagnosis define her. *Body Betrayed Beauty* is a compilation of her writings near the end of her life. Through her insight and advice, Neha left an important legacy for the ones she left behind.

In this memoir, the author shares how she was able **'to enjoy her life despite knowing her end.'** Much of Neha's memoir is directed to her daughter. She describes cherished memories with her new baby girl and offers her insight into all the challenges of growing up. Neha also shares the everyday challenges of being a cancer patient and the need to raise awareness of the insidious disease. Finally, she delves into her own ideas about the nature of God, family, and identity. Each new page reveals a fascinating new facet of an amazing woman—and a new lens through which we should view our own lives.



Neha Ganju Tanna was born in India to Chandra and Deepak Ganju. The family immigrated to Miami, Florida, USA when she was 11 years old. Neha received her bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering at the University of Florida and her master's degree in engineering and management from George Washington University.

While studying for her master's degree, Neha met Kartikeya Tanna. They soon got married and had a beautiful daughter, Aariyana.

Neha worked for Frito-Lay, Pfizer Pharmaceuticals, and Fannie Mae. Neha also loved helping those who were less fortunate through the organisations, 'Able Disabled All People Together' and 'Saint Catherine's Home of Mumbai'. She was an advocate for the Kashmiri Pandits, who were forced to flee their homeland.

Even when Neha was diagnosed with terminal cancer, she never stopped working or loving until the very end of her journey. Her spirit to live never died.

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